

A Beauty to Seduce the Beastly Duke

A Steamy Historical Regency Romance Novel

Harriet Caves



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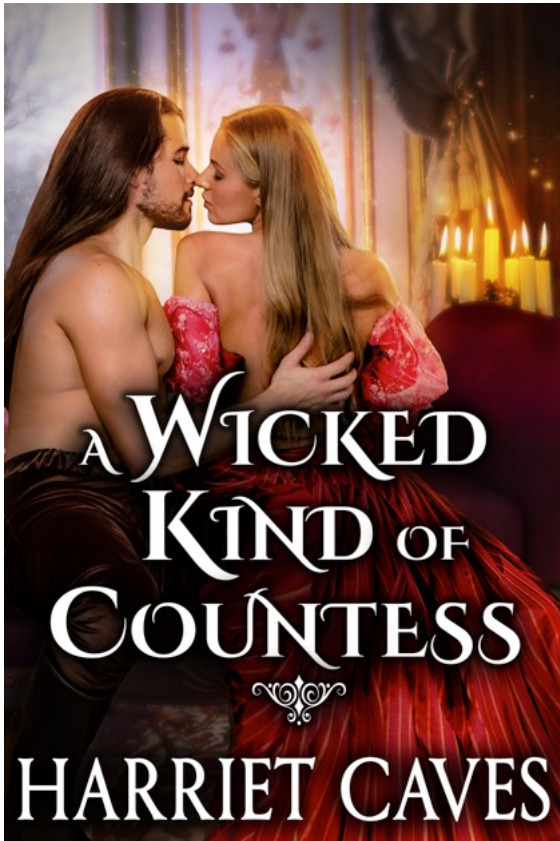
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About the Book

Is she making a deal with the devil or a saint in disguise?

Humiliated on a regular basis by the very man that left her at the altar, Lady Evanora's marriage prospects couldn't be worse. Until the day her father comes with the news that she is to marry a Duke.

After his horrible facial deformity, Magnus Highmore, Duke of Norwood, never intended to appear in society again; let alone marry. Left to handle his late father's debts and decaying estate, marrying a wealthy and meek Lady seems to be his only option.

What he never accounted for this marriage of convenience, was that his new bride would be nothing near meek. Or that he would find that strangely tempting. Until someone they know too well dares attack the only woman he ever loved....

Chapter One

Whispers followed Evanora Rathbone around the ballroom.

The music only added a backdrop for the malicious words to slide through, and though she'd had six years to accustom herself to being the subject of gossip, it still stung.

"Hurry, girl," Aunt Augusta snapped, rapping Evanora's fingers with her fan. "Don't stand there looking gormless. Fetch me a drink."

Suppressing a sigh, Evanora left the safety of her position beside her aunt and made her way toward the punch. Aunt Augusta, both partially deaf and infuriatingly stubborn, insisted Evanora accompany her to every ball she took a fancy to. If she'd had her way, she'd have resigned her position in society years ago, but Aunt Augusta refused to relent.

"How bleak it must be to be left without prospects," a fresh-faced debutante whispered from behind white kid gloves. "Did you know Lord Lore left her at the altar?"

Her friend cast a sharp glance at Evanora. "What could she have done for him to do that?"

Evanora, obliged by the dancing couples to remain in place, kept her gaze straight ahead. She'd learned long ago that she couldn't contradict the rumors; ignoring them was the only option left to her, but time and age hadn't eased the burn of anger or the sharp pang of mortification.

"I don't know the specifics, but I believe it was quite improper. Mama told me everyone was very shocked when it happened. He did the right thing by throwing her over, *I think*."

Another glance was cast in Evanora's direction, this one rather less subtle. "I agree."

Her cheeks burning, Evanora poured a glass of punch and walked back along the edge of the room, where the mamas watched their daughters dancing with fierce and possessive pride. Once, her mama had been there with them, watching Evanora's meteoric rise, but illness had taken her before Luther Jackson, Viscount Lore, had orchestrated her fall. There were few things in her life Evanora was glad of, but she was glad her mother had never seen her disgrace.

Aunt Augusta was deep in conversation with a capped lady by her side as Evanora approached. She took the glass with rheumy hands. "Go and entertain yourself, Evanora," she said brusquely. "Don't bother me with your nonsense."

"Yes, Aunt," Evanora murmured, retreating to stand against the wall once again.

Only a few minutes passed, as she bobbed her head to the music and silently wished she too was dancing, before an unwelcome voice said, "Ah, Lady Evanora."

She turned to see Lord Lore approaching her with a rakish smile. Once, she'd fallen in love with his square jaw and the light of battle that seemed perpetually aglow in his dark eyes, but those days had long passed.

"What a pleasant surprise to see you here," he said.

"I'm surprised you consider it pleasant."

"How could I not when you've provided me with such... pleasure in the past?"

She pinned her fists under her elbows, both to ground herself and to stop herself from hitting him. "You know as well as I do that is false."

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"I'm tempted to call you worse."

He caught her arm, his fingers gripping hard enough to assure her escape would be futile. “Is that a threat, Lady Evanora? I warn you not to trifle with me unless you want your fingers burned.”

“People are staring,” she hissed. “Unhand me.”

Smiling coldly, he acquiesced. “You’d do well to heed my warning. Informing people I’m a liar is more likely to do you more harm than me.”

Odious, *odious* man. She whirled, the room blurring before her, as she looked for an escape—or even just a kind face. Even her family had abandoned her tonight; her brother was no doubt gaming in the adjacent room, with no thought to her comfort or the flames of rumor Lord Lore insisted on fanning.

Lord Ripley, as though sensing her distress, skirted a mass of giggling debutantes. “My Lady Evanora,” he said, bowing over her hand. On the cusp of fifty, with a buried wife behind him and no further wish to marry, Lord Ripley was more of a father figure to Evanora than a friend. He was also one of the few men who countenanced her society. “You’re looking quite flushed, My Dear. Do come and get some air.”

“It’s so dreadful in there,” she confided once they reached the balcony. Mindful of her tattered reputation, she lingered by the door in full view of the ballroom. “You would think after six years, people might have moved on from my scandal.”

“There’s nothing so delicious to the ton as scandal, My Dear, as you well know.”

“Has no one else done anything worthy of attention in six years?”

“You forget that you’ve been present every season since your first, and Lord Lore has made it his goal to ensure what passed between you isn’t forgotten.”

“He could have just married and moved on,” she raged. “Why continue to torment me?”

“You’re a symbol of his political success.”

That was true: it had become belatedly apparent that Lord Lore had only proposed marriage to her, he had only charmed her so utterly, in order to ruin her and her father. Because of his actions, their good name was besmirched and her father's political career had ended. Jackson, Lord Lore, her father's political opponent, had won.

"It's base," she said, pacing. The heat of the ball had brought a flush to her cheeks and, she was quite sure, had tangled her hair. "Everything he did was base. And cruel."

"You're absolutely right, My Dear."

She sighed, pressing the back of one hand to her cheeks. "And now, because of it, my lot is to be a spinster."

Lord Ripley took his snuffbox from his waistcoat. "Perhaps so, but you can't be sure that'll be your lot forever."

"What man will marry me?"

"You would be surprised."

"If you're proposing—"

"Not me, My Dear," he said, horrified at the thought. "A younger man, perhaps. One not much in society."

"Well, he'd have to be not much in society to marry me." She sighed gloomily. "If only I could exchange places with you. You're both widowed and a man."

"Both entirely out of my control, I assure you."

Despite herself, she laughed. "I'll endeavor to forgive you for it."

The stars were out tonight, masked by occasional wisps of cloud-like veils. She tipped her head back and let the breeze caress her warm cheeks.

"I suppose I ought to return to the ball and endure another hour or two of gossip," she said with the thin flicker of a smile.

“Would you care to dance?” Lord Ripley asked gallantly. His love of food and port had given him a rather ungainly paunch, highly decorated by his red waistcoat, and the thought of standing up with him made her smile. Still, it was kind of him to offer, and if at least she had one dance of the evening, it might somewhat lessen the rumors.

It took a further three hours, until dawn’s light stained the early morning sky, for her brother to emerge. Aunt Augusta snoozed on a sofa and rose blearily to be escorted to her carriage.

“You’re looking pale,” he said with cheerful indifference once they’d disposed of their aunt. “Didn’t you have a good time?”

“No. Did you?”

“Could’ve been better.” He handed her into their carriage and took his seat opposite her. “I won’t bore you with that stuff, though. You wouldn’t be interested. And,” he added with a self-conscious look, “it’s not proper for a lady to know about such things.”

Evanora leaned against her seat with a sigh. It was no news to her that her brother, three-and-twenty-year-old Charles Rathbone, was a budding gamester. While the news grieved her, she understood it was customary for young men to explore the world of gambling before marriage and responsibility steadied them.

Or rather, steadied most of them; some were beyond all hope. All she could do was trust her brother wouldn’t become one of them. To her surprise, the light in her father’s study was still burning. When they entered the house, Mortimer Rathbone, the Earl of Cane, strode to meet them. Despite the late hour, his hazel eyes were clear.

“Evanora,” he said triumphantly, saluting her on the cheek. “I have excellent news.”

Evanora cast a glance at her brother, who looked as nonplussed as she felt. “What news, Father?”

“Come, sit down.” Without waiting for a response, he tucked her hand in his arm and led her into his study. The remnants of a fire burned in the grate, and a brandy tumbler sat on his desk.

“Am I required, Father?” Charles asked from the doorway.

“No, no,” Mortimer said absently, waving a hand. “This doesn’t concern you.”

Evanora settled herself into the chair opposite her father and waited.

“My child, you know your happiness is of the greatest import to me,” he said, taking her hand in both of his. “With that in mind, I have an announcement to make that will change your fortune—all our fortunes—forever. You are to be married to the Duke of Norwood.”

Her mouth opened with an audible *pop*. The Duke of Norwood? It couldn’t be. She’d never so much as laid eyes on His Grace, and the rumors of his past were not kind. “The Duke of Norwood?” she faltered. “Surely there must be some mistake.”

“No mistake. I approached him myself.” Her father beamed with misguided pride. “You see, he’s looking for a wife. Now you’re five-and-twenty, your prospects of finding a husband aren’t high. I offered your hand in marriage, and he accepted.”

“You... offered my hand in marriage. To the Duke of Norwood. And he *accepted*?” Evanora swallowed. “Does he know who I am?”

“Everyone knows who you are, Child. Your reputation precedes you.”

“Thank you,” she said dryly.

“Think of it,” he urged. “Your own house. The Norwood Estate is extensive, I believe, if a little... well, never mind that now. It’ll be a marriage of convenience, of course, but it’ll give you social standing and independence. Think of it. It’s the best offer you’re going to get, and he’ll be able to provide better for you as your husband than I can as your father.”

With her mother gone, and only her father left to care for her interests, to refuse such an offer, and one he was so pleased with, seemed churlish.

And yet. And yet.

“Are you quite sure, Father?” she asked. “The rumors surrounding the Duke of Norwood are—” Well, they were distasteful. He was known to be a cold, brooding man, with a dislike for public appearances. Still further talked of was his disfigurement. Evanora wasn’t sure what form it took, but he was known to be hideous—that was, in fact, the reason attributed to his reclusiveness.

“He’s not the only one with rumors,” her father said. “If the Duke can overlook them, so can you.”

“But—” *I don’t want to marry him.* Given her situation, and her lack of choices, the words sounded unbearably selfish. She closed her eyes. “If you wish it, Father.”

“Chin up, Girl. Few marriages are love matches, you know, and you’ll be a Duchess. Whatever the Duke of Norwood’s past,” he said hurriedly, “you know many young ladies would jump at the chance to be in your position.”

Evanora didn’t doubt it. Few things could tarnish a good name, even a bad man. Whatever his faults, he was a Duke. He had status. For ladies on the marriage mart looking for husbands, he would still be a catch. But she wasn’t one of those ladies. She didn’t care about a title. A title, she was certain, wouldn’t bring her happiness, and it seemed unlikely the man would, either.

Her heart heavy, she climbed the stairs and readied herself for bed.

Chapter Two

“**T**he Earl of Cane to see you, Your Grace.”

The Duke of Norwood, Magnus Highmore, looked up from his papers in surprise. It wasn't often anyone came to visit, and it was less often he admitted them. This particular visit, however, piqued his interest enough for him to say, “Show him in.”

The Earl of Cane arrived on a breeze of apologies and excuses. Magnus hadn't often been to Parliament, but he knew of the scandal that had erupted six years earlier and resulted in Lord Cane's swift exit from the political field. It was with interest, then, that he examined his visitor.

Lord Cane had been a tall man once, and remnants of a handsome face lingered in the craggy lines that now defined him. His clothes were old fashioned but of the highest quality, and his boots had been meticulously shined.

“Please excuse me for calling on you like this,” Lord Cane said to end his stream of apologies, keeping his gaze very firmly away from Magnus' face.

“Not at all. Would you care for a drink?”

“Brandy, if it's not too much trouble.”

Magnus motioned to his footman and smiled at his visitor. “Please make yourself comfortable. Am I to suppose urgent business brought you here?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Lord Cane sent a darting glance at Magnus and looked away with a barely perceptible wince. “Forgive the

presumption, but it came to my notice that you're on the search for a wife."

"I am."

"You may have heard of my daughter, The Lady Evanora Rathbone. She was the unfortunate victim of a scandal, quite unprovoked and undeserving, several years ago, and it's my thought you would suit. She's a steady girl, very pleasing, and would be happy to live a more... reclusive life."

Magnus' lips twitched at the unorthodox proposal, given by a man clearly unused to doing such things. He had, of course, heard of Evanora Rathbone. Few hadn't, and her former betrothed, the Viscount of Lore, had done everything to ensure her prospects were forever ruined. He'd pitied her then, but six years ago he'd been merely four-and-twenty, barely back from the war, and with no thought to marry.

"If you would forgive my being so bold, Your Grace, I would like to offer my daughter's hand in marriage."

Magnus poured himself and his guest a drink from the newly arrived brandy. The Earl of Cane was a wealthy man; his eldest—and only—daughter would likely come with a large dowry.

"I presume you know my reasons for marrying," he said, passing the glass to his companion. "Or, more specifically, you are aware of the condition Norwood Estate was left to me." A grim smile crossed his face. "My late father was... careless with his finances."

Lord Cane inclined his head. "I knew of your father, Your Grace."

"Then you'll know of his extravagances." Magnus rose and leaned against the mantelpiece, examining a ticking clock with apparent fascination. "I have the unlucky job of attempting to maintain a dying estate with few funds to do so. Marriage is one of the ways I intend to do this."

"I understand."

"When I marry, it will be a marriage of convenience." He stole a look at the Earl of Cane's rugged face, examining the expression there.

Resignation. "I'm not looking for a woman whose sole purpose in marrying is to gain my family's name."

"My daughter is unlikely to receive any other offers. If you were to accept my proposal—if you could protect her from the enemy my family has made—you can be sure of receiving every necessary financial assistance."

Without emerging into society, Magnus had few prospects of a mutually beneficial match. The arrival of the Earl of Cane, with a desperate daughter to dispose of, was an opportunity he couldn't toss aside.

"In which case, we are in agreement." Magnus tossed back the brandy. "If you are agreeable, I wish to marry swiftly."

"Of course."

"And while I will make the necessary announcement, there's no need for this to be a large and public affair."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Allow me to make the arrangements," he continued. "I have a chapel that will suit my purpose."

Perplexed, Lord Cane nodded.

"Many thanks," Magnus said, sitting again and raising a hand in clear dismissal. "I believe we will both leave here happier men."

"Indeed, Your Grace, much happier." Lord Cane inclined his head and allowed the butler to lead him from the room.

Magnus sighed and swilled the contents of his glass. The amber liquid surged in the flickering light from the fire. He'd never met Lady Evanora, but there seemed little need to before the wedding. Whether the rumors about her were true made no matter; he wasn't marrying her for her virtue. All he could hope was that she was a calm and pliant girl, mature enough to accept the marriage for what it was.

Lord Cane, too, was remarkably compliant. Doting fathers tended to

be, in his experience, but that was only another reason to agree to the marriage. After all, if he'd approached *Magnus* of all people as a future husband for his daughter, he must be desperate indeed.



Miss Amelia Weatherby simpered behind her fan. Luther, already bored of the girl, did his best to look engaged with her conversation, though it amounted to little more than passing observations.

“How I do adore Isabel’s new hat,” she said. Restlessly, Luther twitched the reins. Inviting her for a ride in Hyde Park had been a mistake, though one he could hardly rectify now. “Don’t you agree, Lord Lore?”

“Indeed.”

“Lady Kirkton is expecting another child, which is very exciting. I do hope it’s a son. Oh—did you see Miss Annabelle’s dress? I declare it’s quite a vile shade of puce. So few girls can get away with puce, don’t you think?” She placed a finger coyly against her lips, well aware that with her complexion, she was one of the few girls whom puce suited. “Oh, and Lord Lore, did you hear the news about Lady Evanora?”

Luther glanced at his pretty companion. “What news?” he asked shortly. He’d never given a reason as to why he nursed such distaste for the Rathbone family, and he had no intention of doing so. Evanora, with her big brown eyes and succulent mouth, had enticed him more than he had bargained for. When she had rejected his advances, begging him to wait until after they were married, it had enraged him enough that he had ruined her without a moment’s thought.

Perhaps he was no longer in love with her—he had long since been unable to differentiate between love and hate when it came to Evanora—but seeing her on the fringes of society gave him vicious pleasure. One he had no intention of relinquishing.

Miss Weatherby fluttered her eyelashes at him. “Why, only that she’s engaged to the Duke of Norwood.”

“Magnus?” Luther exploded before he could recall his self-control. “Where did you hear this?”

“Oh, everyone’s talking about it. The entire town is up in arms.”

“So I should imagine,” he muttered grimly. “Come, we need to return.”

“Oh, but—My Lord, you promised me—”

“I know what I promised.”

After a few moments of silence, she spoke again. “I heard it’s to be a small affair. Of course, I haven’t spoken to Lady Evanora myself—”

“I should hope not.”

“No, Mama would be displeased,” she agreed placidly.

“Do you know anything else?”

Sharp blue eyes snapped to his face. “You seem especially interested in her, My Lord.”

“The Duke of Norwood hasn’t been in company for over five years,” he replied, smoothing over his words with a bland smile. “I’m merely surprised he’s decided to choose a wife.”

“I was surprised he chose Evanora,” she said pettishly. “He might be disfigured, but he’s a *Duke*. If he’d but returned to society, I’m certain he could have had anyone.”

“Ah, but that would require his returning to society, My Dear.”

“Do you not think it likely?”

“Given his willingness to marry Lady Evanora—without, I believe, them having ever met—I suspect he’s prepared to do anything to avoid it.”

“Oh.” It was clear Amelia hadn’t considered this; a look of unfamiliar concentration crossed her doll-like face. “So you think he’s marrying Evanora so he *doesn’t* have to return to society?”

“One must have a wife to sire an heir, Miss Weatherby.”

“I’m sure she’s capable of doing *that* at least.”

Luther smiled, but internally he was seething. After everything he’d done to ensure the Rathbone family were nigh on outcasts, they’d secured Evanora the position of Duchess. It was unacceptable.

Although there wasn’t anything he could do to prevent its happening, the snippets he’d provided Amelia would spread like wildfire through the ton. Alongside speculation about the nature of the Duke’s disfigurement and his reasons for retiring from society, that would be enough. For now.

Chapter Three

Married to a man she'd never met.

Evanora spent the next few weeks in a haze of confusion. The Duke of Norwood, contrary to her expectations, had neglected to visit her, and she had little idea what he'd be like. Cold, she suspected, but then she'd always suspected that. Her father had sat her down and explained that a marriage of convenience was not one of love, but it would give her status, respectability, and independence.

"I just wish I could meet him," she lamented to Johanna Wallace, her lady's maid and closest friend. "I know I won't like him, nor he me, but at least I shouldn't have to meet him at the altar. I've heard he's very disfigured. What if I'm shocked?"

Johanna pursed her lips in the mirror as she finished unpinning Evanora's hair. "Can he really be so bad?"

"They say he's sired all sorts of illegitimate children," Evanora said on a whisper. This wasn't the sort of information a polite young lady was supposed to know, but since the news of their engagement had circulated, so had the worst of rumors. "And once, he killed a man in a duel."

"I doubt he's done that, My Lady, or likely he'd have fled to France."

"I'm convinced he was a terrible gamester," she insisted, removing her earrings and placing them carefully on the vanity. "Everyone knows the Estate's in a bad state."

Johanna put her hands on her waist. "Are you determined to think ill of him?"

“The world thinks ill of him.”

“The world thinks ill of you, too,” she reminded Evanora. “As his wife, it’s your duty to think better of him.”

Her duty. Evanora had been hearing a lot about her duty; it was her duty to marry him, especially as the prospect brought such good fortune to the family. It was her duty to think well of him, to support him, and to remain loyal.

None of these duties considered that she would rather not be shackled to a man whose moral compass pointed a few degrees east of due north. Still, if only for her own good, she ought to hope the man himself wasn’t as bad as the rumors made him out to be.

“You’ll be the head of your own household,” Johanna said bracingly. “Your Aunt Augusta won’t be able to require your presence—”

“To every ball, you mean?” Evanora said dryly. “If you think that, you haven’t met my aunt.”

“I’m *quite* sure she’ll be too intimidated by His Grace to even visit.”

Both girls giggled before Evanora sighed. Marrying the Duke of Norwood would release her from her current obligations, and would elevate her position in society. Few dared cross a Duchess, no matter her origins. Still, rather than a liberation, it felt as though the walls of her life were closing around her, the methods of escape shutting one by one. As a woman, she was subject to her father: a man she knew to be kindly. As a wife, she would be subject to her husband, and the Duke of Norwood was a mystery.



Evanora woke on her wedding day to inauspicious rain. It pounded against the windows, and wind howled around the Manor as she dressed.

“It’ll come out nice later,” Johanna said, as she wielded the curling tongs with practiced efficiency. “You’ll see.”

Evanora gave no answer. Now the moment had arrived, she felt sick.

The usual response to the prospect of marriage was presumably some level of excitement, but she'd never once felt excited; in fact, the closer she'd come to the event, the more dread squeezed her stomach. It didn't seem real—it *couldn't* be real—but real it was, and she couldn't hide from it any longer.

When she'd finished, Johanna stepped back and assessed Evanora's reflection with concern lurking in her gray eyes. "There, now, you look beautiful."

While during her first few seasons, Evanora had widely been considered a pretty girl, she'd never felt the term 'beautiful' to be less aptly applied. The luster had gone from her hazel eyes, and no amount of rouge could hide the paleness of her cheeks. Even her curls hung limply. She was conscious, gazing at her reflection, of a wish to cry. On a day when the world squalled around her, it might have been appropriate, but she wasn't one to give in to foolish urges.

"Thank you, Johanna," she said with a faint smile. "Is it time to depart?"

"I believe the carriage is waiting, My Lady."

It was with pomp and grandeur they arrived at a damp chapel where her father and brother waited on the dryness of the porch. It was deeply ironic, she thought as she was handed down from the carriage, that such a grand happening was occurring in such a damp, dismal place. If she'd been a little less overwrought, she might have delighted in the ridiculousness of the situation; as it was, only her father's proud smile stemmed the tears.

"My Girl," he said, tucking her arm firmly into her arm. "You look... Charles, doesn't she look wonderful?"

Charles, alarmed to be called on in such a way, nodded in doubtful agreement. "Lovely."

"I'll miss you both," Evanora said, and because she felt the lump in her throat rise, added, "shall we do it, then?"

The chapel was, thankfully, somewhat less damp on the inside, although it was sparsely decorated and small. Only three occupants awaited them: a tall, brown-haired man in a blue, military-style coat;

a fair-haired young man in a similar coat; and the Bishop.

At their arrival, the tall man turned to greet them. There could be no doubt this was the Duke. While he was otherwise perfectly proportioned, a puckered scar stretched diagonally across his face, from under his left eyepatch to his opposite chin. It looked as though it had healed badly, and even now the skin was red and raised, threatening to twist the corner of his mouth.

She should be relieved, she thought, that his disfigurement was restricted to his face, but instead could barely take her eyes from the scar. This was the man she would marry. This man, whose terrible past lay pitted behind him, and whose face whispered secrets about that past, would be the caretaker of her future.

The Duke of Norwood, contrary to her expectations, appeared equally taken aback. His one eye, icy blue and cold, danced across her face and down, across her wedding dress. It was cream, to complement her complexion, but she had otherwise begged for it to be plain. This may be her wedding, but to celebrate such a small affair with an ornate dress seemed absurd.

“Your Grace,” her father said, bowing beside her. Charles, on her other side, also bowed. She knew she should curtsy, but with her gaze caught on the lines of his face—specifically, the line of his scar—she could not.

As though startled from a reverie, the Duke blinked and nodded at the two men on her either side. “Lord Cane, Lord Rathbone, Lady Evanora.”

His voice came to Evanora as a surprise; rather than rasping, as she’d childishly supposed, it was low and rich.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you at last.”

At last. As though he hadn’t had ample opportunity these past few weeks. Keeping her treacherous thoughts from her face, she dropped into a curtsy. Her dress, damp with rain, clung to her legs. “Your Grace.”

“Thank you for your punctuality.”

Thank you for your punctuality. A less romantic statement had surely never been said. Her heart swelled as her father led her down the aisle and deposited her beside her future husband who, rather than so much as look at her, gestured for the ceremony to begin. Evanora begged the Bishop with her eyes to see her distress—surely, he must have been aware of her future husband’s disfigurement—but the man droned resolutely on.

If she had been a different girl, a less dutiful girl, she might have turned and fled the chapel. What harm could more scandal do? She, at least, was already as blackened in society’s eyes as the proverbial sheep. Her father, however, had suffered from her disgrace, as had her brother. The marriage wasn’t for her sake, it was for theirs. And it was for their sake she lifted her chin and recited her vows with a clear, steady voice.

“I now pronounce you man and wife.”

The Duke offered her his arm, and in shock she took it as he led her down the aisle, past her father and brother, past the fair-haired man whose name she didn’t even know, out of the door where a carriage awaited them, his coat of arms on the front.

“But, my father—”

“You will have ample opportunity to see him in the future.”

Confusion warred with resentment in her breast as he handed her into the carriage. Wind rocked them as he settled opposite her, his long legs almost touching hers.

“I presume your father told you of the state of my affairs,” he said with alarming frankness.

“He—I know some, Your Grace.”

“The Norwood Estate is not what it used to be. As its Lady, you will be assisting me in returning it to its former glory.”

“A housekeeper can do that as well as a Lady,” she said.

He raised an eyebrow, and she bit her lip, her customary flush

spreading across her cheeks. Now was not the time for bitterness to manifest itself.

“I apologize, Your Grace. That was out of line.”

“I understand this may be a difficult transition for you, and you’re correct in that a housekeeper can do much. However, there are certain duties a housekeeper cannot perform.”

“Of course.”

“You can be certain I’ll do all I can to make you comfortable.”

Evanora had never aspired to much romance; she’d always known that all the circulating novels she read were fantasy. Men were not expected to produce such glorious professions of love as were written on those pages. That she should be so prosaically addressed by her new husband, however, came as somewhat of a shock.

“Thank you for your consideration,” she returned, and was rewarded by seeing him sit back fractionally. Reserve fell back between them, and stripped of anything further to say, Evanora turned her gaze to the open countryside that now surrounded them. The rain had, thankfully, stopped, and a watery sun struggled its way through the clouds. Johanna would be at the Norwood Estate now, unpacking and preparing everything for her arrival. They would eat, presumably, and she would have an opportunity to explore her new home, and then later—

His Grace, a stranger who wished for a marriage of convenience, would not be visiting her. There were few things of which she was confident, but this was one of them.



It took several hours for them to reach Norwood Castle, although the Duke reassured her it wasn’t a castle in anything but name; indeed, it rather more resembled a manor house, though the walls were thick and crumbling. Evanora gazed in barely concealed horror at the strangling ivy and dull windows.

The austere butler and withered housekeeper further confirmed her suspicions that the entire estate was living in the past. The Duke left

her almost immediately, striding away with the steward, and she was left to entertain herself.

It was lucky, she reflected, that any misconceptions about the nature of the marriage and his interest in her had been stripped away, or she may have been sorely disappointed by his neglect. As it was, she allowed Mrs. Clement, the housekeeper, to take her on a tour of the house, from her bedchamber—adjoining her husband's and fully outfitted—to the wilting gardens. The Castle was practically disintegrating around her ears, but it was the gardens that shocked her the most. Remnants of formal gardens remained, but overgrown decorative hedges framed what may have once been a maze, and roses tangled in rampant glory across the paths.

The garden would be the first thing she addressed, she resolved. If her role was to assist in bringing the Castle to life, she would do so. Mrs. Clement had done her best, but she was fighting against a losing tide.

Evanora, however, had been fighting against a losing tide for six years; if anyone could prevail in the face of hardship, it would be her.

Dinner was a quiet affair. The dining room was overly large for just two of them, and although the food was delicious—Evanora resolved to visit the cook the next day—the atmosphere could not have been more frigid.

“Did you find the Estate as you'd hoped it to be?” she inquired.

“Quite the opposite.”

Odious man. “You employ a good cook here.”

“Yes, she's perfectly adequate.”

Evanora pushed the venison around her plate. In truth, she wasn't hungry; the nausea from the morning had sunk into calm despair that didn't call for something as mundane as dinner. “I know so very little of you,” she said. “I hardly feel as though we can be married. Come, can we not converse?”

He looked up at her for the first time, from the end of a table so absurdly large only his eyepatch and scar were clearly visible. “About what?”

“About—” She hesitated. No one had asked that question before, and she wasn’t entirely sure how to proceed. “Do you not like to talk?”

“Infrequently.”

“And as your wife, you have no wish to talk to me?”

“Have you not had your fill of mindless conversation and banalities from your time in society?” He looked at her for a moment longer, as though she was a puzzle he could not piece together, before turning to his meal.

“I’m intrigued to learn you consider your conversation skills banal and meaningless,” she said with breathless daring, rising from the table. “Please excuse me, I’m tired after the journey.”

The Duke made no demur as she stalked away, head held high, until she reached the drawing room. There, on the window seat looking out over meticulously planted trees, though wildness grew there now, she rested her head against the windowpane.

He’d been right to ask if she’d had enough of insipid conversation—in the drawing rooms of society’s diamond’s, she’d found nothing but vapidity, and she had indeed tired of it. To be without all conversation, however—

Well, she comforted herself, she would not be without all conversation. Johanna was here, and their friendship was of such long standing that she need not fear going without conversation. She would not have a loving husband, and she would not have variation to her daily routine, but she would have her maid and confidante. That would be enough.

When she retired to bed, she discovered Johanna had unpacked and laid a silk nightgown on the bed.

“Why, Johanna,” she said, caught between amusement and embarrassment as she held it up, “I hardly feel this is necessary.”

Johanna gave her Lady a knowing look. “It’s your wedding night, Your Grace.”

“Don’t you ‘Your Grace’ me. That means nothing.”

“I’m sure your husband would disagree.”

“We hardly know one another,” Evanora said firmly. “I’m certain he won’t be visiting me tonight.”

“He’s still your husband.”

“And if it were a normal marriage, perhaps I would expect something different, but—” She sighed, slumping on the bed. “It’s a marriage of convenience. He’s not interested in me at all.”

“You never know with men,” Johanna said darkly, moving to unpin Evanora’s hair. “Best to be prepared.”

“Do *all* of my nightclothes look like this?”

“I’m afraid so, Your Grace.”

She dug her maid in the ribs. “You can stop calling me that. I might be a Duchess, but I don’t *feel* like one.”

“You might in time. I know it’s not what you wanted, but you might find yourself happy here.”

“One can only hope, I suppose.” With Johanna’s help, she changed and climbed into bed where a hot brick awaited her. “I’m glad you’re here with me. I think I would feel very alone in this rambling old castle without you.”

“I won’t leave you,” Johanna said, giving her hand a squeeze.

To Evanora’s surprise, there was a knock on the door. Johanna gave her a meaningful glance and curtsied to the Duke as he entered. Evanora watched her go with horror.

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said dryly as she moved to cover herself. “I’ve merely come to assure you that despite your reputation, I’ve no intention of taking advantage of you.”

Her eyes flashed. “Despite my reputation? What do you mean by

that?"

Chapter Four

Magnus, at no point in this arrangement, had anticipated a

wife as prone to temper as Evanora seemed to be. In fact, given society's condemnation of her, he'd expected little beauty and less grace. To be confronted with a composed lady with scornful eyes and an expressive mouth had therefore caught him off guard.

To discover, furthermore, that she was quite capable of holding her own—indeed, that she was positively fiery—had been equally discomfiting. His expectations of a placid, plain woman with whom he could quietly share his life, were rapidly coming to an end.

She tossed the covers to one side, forgetting to cover herself in her anger. Without thinking, he let his gaze dip to the roundness of her breasts and peaked nipples. Desire, hot and ready, washed over him. It had been a while since he'd enjoyed the society of any woman, much less one in her nightdress. And in *that* nightdress. Without thinking, he took a step toward her.

Her mouth tightened. "I'm amazed you chose me to be your wife given your poor opinion of me."

He returned his gaze to her eyes. "I had no qualms on that front."

"If the rumors were true," she seethed, "I'm sure I would be grateful indeed."

Two things became apparent: one, that she was not the wanton woman society had portrayed her as being; two, that when she was angry, her eyes snapped magnificently.

Three, although this was not showcased by her anger, he was

unreasonably attracted to her.

“My apologies,” he began, but she had not finished.

“I’d have thought that you might, with some effort toward civility, have determined whether those rumors were true before condemning me. Am I to, therefore, consider all rumors of you are true?”

“If you do, I wonder that you stand before me now unafraid,” he said coldly.

Awareness washed over her face, and he immediately regretted the rashness of his words. It had been a long time since he’d been provoked into saying something cutting, and time hadn’t lessened the guilt of seeing his words find their mark.

She turned her gaze, hazel brown with glints of green, to his face. “Ought I be afraid?”

“If you were to be,” he said impatiently, “I wonder why I came here with the express purpose of reassuring you.”

“Given the fact you instantly insulted me, I wonder if that was your intention at all.”

“I did not intend to insult you.”

“If you had endured six years of lies, only for your husband to make the same assumptions—” she broke off the words, putting a hand to her throat in a display of vulnerability that effectively erased his anger. “Would you not, too, be insulted?”

This was not how he had intended this interaction to have gone; without thinking, he stepped toward her. “Forgive me. Please, don’t cry.”

“I know what kind of marriage this is to be,” she said, drawing herself up. It was with an effort he kept his gaze on her face, though he knew that the silken material across her body did little to hide her lush curves. “I did not come into this union with ideas of affection, and I have no illusions about how it will continue. Please, with all due respect, I’m tired and I wish to sleep.”

Desire for his wife's body was as unwelcome as her anger. Resisting her would be harder than he'd anticipated, but he would not allow himself to be swayed by a woman he'd never before met.

"Goodnight, Duchess," he said.

Shock crossed her face at the title as he left her chamber and entered his. This was all rapidly feeling like a mistake. Her father had called her *steady*, but the woman he'd just encountered—vibrant, passionate, and opinionated—had been anything but. What's more, he couldn't stop thinking about the swell of her breasts and the curve of her generous hips.

He groaned. Perhaps a cold bath would be in order. Anything to prevent him dwelling on the beautiful woman next door who, if he should wish it, would be his to bed. Except he had promised not to take advantage of her, and that was one promise he intended to keep—not just for her, but for his sanity. No woman could ever grow to love a man like him, and it would be safer for both of them if he kept his distance.



Evanora woke with a headache and the heavy sensation of disappointment. It lingered even after Johanna brought her coffee and opened the curtains. The Duke was not an amiable man, and he appeared to bring out the worst in her. Her worst fears had been fulfilled, and although he hadn't forced himself on her—something, for a split second when he'd stepped toward her, she'd been concerned he would do—she was now shackled to a man whose gentility matched his disfigurement.

Still, she was not the kind of girl to dwell on mistakes. If this was to be her life, she would make the best of it. If her father's money was to go into restoring the Estate, she would grow to love it. The Duke would be a part of her life, yes, but not its sum total. She would be happy despite his presence, rather than because of it.

With the early morning sunlight glinting on the garden dew, these newfound resolutions were easy to make and easy to believe. With the thought of avoiding the Duke, she dressed quickly and descended early. Her father and brother rarely breakfasted before eleven, and she anticipated the Duke would be the same.

This was, however, optimistic; she pulled up short in the doorway at the sight of the Duke partaking in a small breakfast over a newspaper.

“Duchess,” he said in surprise, though there was no warmth in his voice. “I did not expect you to arise so early.”

“Nor I you,” she returned, taking her place at the opposite end of the table. “My Lord Duke.”

A frown caught his brows. “I wish you would not call me that. As we are husband and wife, perhaps you would consent to addressing me as Magnus?”

Magnus. Her tongue curled around the word before she recollected herself. “We’re married by name only,” she reminded him as she reached for the jam. “I see no reason for such informality.”

“Call me what you wish, then, but for Heaven’s sake save me from *My Lord Duke*.”

“As you wish, Your Grace.”

His one eye slitted, and she bit back a smile of triumph. This was not what she had intended. Her wretched temper.

“I should apologize for last night,” she said. “I should not have lost my temper.”

“And I should not have insulted you.” He lowered the newspaper slightly. “I wish for you to be comfortable here.”

She glanced around at the large room, cobwebs gathering in the corners. Usually, footmen would line the walls, but they were alone. A large window with a pleasing aspect looked out over a lake. While overgrown now, it had the potential to be extremely pretty.

“Is the Estate large?” she inquired.

He looked over the top of the newspaper again. From this angle, she could hardly see the scar at all, and it gave her leave to notice his blue eye was unusually expressive. She read impatience there. “Reasonably. If you’re wishing to go walking, you may do so within the confines of

the Estate.”

“Might you not—”

His expression shuttered and he rose. “I’ll see you at dinner, Duchess.”

“Well,” she said to herself as he left the room, breakfast uneaten before him. “How rude!”

Rudeness was, unfortunately, the Duke’s default position. Or rather, if not rudeness, then coldness. He didn’t so much dismiss her as infer all attempts at conversation were undesirable. The Castle felt more like a prison than a home, though he made no objection to her writing to her father, and the Duke was its keeper. Her keeper.

If she had been a different woman, less accustomed to adversity and more prone to the hysterics, this might have broken her spirit. Compared to the malicious whispers and rumors, however, indifference was far less of an evil. And one she intended to overcome.

This wasn’t because of fondness for the Duke. In fact, she viewed him rather as a villainous figure, his eyepatch and scar doing much to add to the impression. Nevertheless, if she was to remain at the Castle, she fully intended to have an active role in its restoration. And for that, she required the Duke’s help.

“I’m going riding,” she announced from the doorway of the library. As always, when he became aware of her presence, he looked at her in a disagreeable way that implied she was unwelcome. His mouth hardened, and his gaze dropped down her riding habit—one she thought was becoming—before snapping back to her face with a jolt. “Would you care to join me?”

“No, thank you.”

“Are you engaged in business?”

“I’m certainly engaged,” he said dryly, putting down his pen. “Is there something you require?”

“I was hoping to discuss managing the Estate with you.”

The eyebrow above his one good eye rose. "I hardly feel that's necessary, Duchess."

"I should think it is, My Lord Duke," she retorted, and had the dubious pleasure of seeing irritation spark across his face. "If I'm to be its Lady, I feel I should have some understanding of the steps you're undertaking to run it. How much of my father's money have you used?"

His jaw clenched. "That's not a matter that concerns you."

"Why? Because I'm a woman or because I'm your wife?"

"Because," he said deliberately, "I have not yet called on your father's finances."

She frowned, the wind knocked from her sails. "Oh."

"Quite."

"I want to help," she said, tugging at her gloves. "If I'm to live here with you, I want to feel *useful*. Not stowed away like a—like a trinket."

"A trinket?" A reluctant smile tugged at his lips. "Do you feel as though I'm stowing you away?"

"You don't appear to have any use for me."

He frowned, a heavy brow descending over his eye in a forbidding look, but his frustration had a distracted air. "If you wish to help, inform Thomas, my groom, to take you for a tour of the Estate. Visit our tenants and ask Mrs. White, the cook, to make up some food baskets for them."

It wasn't much of an occupation, but she curtsied anyway. Where one concession was given, more might follow. "Thank you, My Lord Duke."

He scowled. "I've asked you not to call me that."

"And I," she said on a sweet smile, "asked to be included in your

management of the Estate. Good day, Your Grace.”

He said nothing as she left.



Michael Thomas was a man about twenty years the Duke’s senior who knew the land like the back of his hand.

“That’s where the His Grace used to play,” he said fondly, indicating a cluster of trees perched on a hill. “Whenever he was wanted for something he’d no intention of doing, that’s where he’d be.”

“Did he often escape responsibilities this way?”

Thomas smiled at her in a way that made his skin crease like old leather. “Aye, Your Grace, when he was a boy. When his father was home, they used to ride there together, play fight with sticks—you know the things boys do.”

With a sudden burst of clarity, Evanora pictured the young Duke, brown hair falling into his eyes, revisiting the site his father had granted him memories. It was a lonely picture, and one that made her frown in pity.

“Was he happy here?” she asked quietly. “His Grace. Was it a happy childhood?”

“As happy as many could claim, I daresay.” Thomas clucked his tongue and eased his mount into a trot. “If you look this way, Your Grace, you’ll see some of the Estate’s houses.”

“Oh, they’re falling apart.”

“Aye, Your Grace, the Estate has been falling apart for a long time.”

Evanora watched as skinny children, their arms and legs too long for their bodies, played in the dirt outside tumbledown houses. “What happened?”

“They were laid off a few years ago. Work’s hard to come by in these times.”

“And food, too, I suppose,” she murmured. “Would Mrs. White be amenable to making up a basket for them?”

Thomas pursed his lips. “There are a lot of families in need, Your Grace.”

“Then we shall provide for them all. Come, let me meet them.” Without waiting for his reply, she flicked the reins and approached the dirt path down to the houses. At the sight of her, mothers, dirtied by work and exhaustion, hustled their children back inside. By the time she arrived, only the linen strung between the houses served as evidence they were lived in.

“Your Grace,” one of the women said, wiping her hands on her apron and bobbing into a curtsy. “It’s an honor to meet you.”

“You shouldn’t need to take the children inside,” Evanora said as she dismounted. “I love to see them play.”

“The Duke’s lady mother, Your Grace, she didn’t like to see the children.”

“I see. Well, I’m not the Duke’s lady mother,” she said with a smile. “You need not hide them when I’m around. What is your name?”

“Martha, Your Grace.”

“And your occupation?”

“I’m a seamstress, Your Grace, though there’s not much work to be had in these parts.”

“A seamstress?” she said in feigned delight. “How excellent, I’m in need of a seamstress. Would you be able to come by the Castle tomorrow? I have a few dresses that need seeing to.”

Martha bobbed another curtsy. “You do me an honor, Your Grace.”

“Excellent. I must go, but I’ll return tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Martha said, sinking into yet another curtsy.



Magnus had just finished going through the accounts, with the help of his steward, Williams, when Evanora burst into the library for the second time that day, although this time her hat was askew and there was a flush on her cheeks.

“Excuse us,” Magnus said, nodding to his man. The steward bowed and left the room, and Magnus waited in silence for Evanora to give the reason for her untimely interruption.

“I’ve hired Martha,” she said, patting her wild hair with a look of discomfort. “Oh, I should explain. Thomas took me around the Estate, as you suggested, and I visited a great many of our tenants.”

Undaunted by his lack of enthusiasm, she continued, “I’ve spoken to Mrs. White and I’m going to deliver food packages to the needy tomorrow. I was quite sure you wouldn’t mind my hiring Martha, as you gave me leave to visit the tenants, but—” she stopped guiltily, a bewitching smile flitting across her face. “As you did not *directly* request me to find them employment, I thought I ought to inform you,” she finished.

Magnus leaned back in his chair. Truth be told, he hadn’t anticipated her wanting to take such an active role in the Estate. He should be angry at her insolence, but her flushed face and the sparkle in her eyes—equal parts of pleasure and challenge—dissolved all hard feelings toward her. Unlike this morning, where her beauty had only served to irritate him, now he minded the tug of attraction less.

“You seem to have had a profitable morning,” he said. “I’m much indebted to you for informing me of your exploits.” The guilty smile spread further across her face and it was an effort not to return it. “Tell me more about Martha. In what capacity have you hired her?”

“She’s a seamstress. I’m not sure of her skill, but you know, her children—”

“Please, no talk of children.”

She narrowed her eyes. “There’s no need to be so hard hearted.”

Her indignation only amused him more. “I’m a monster,” he agreed.

“Have you made any other commitments on my purse I should know of?”

“There doesn’t appear to be a gardener.”

“And it is not within your realm of duty to hire one,” he said firmly. “I understand the gardens are pitiful; one day, I hope to restore them. However, my priority is the Castle and our tenants.”

She drew herself up and summoned the calm collectedness of the woman he’d met on their wedding day. “My Lord Duke.”

Infernal girl. “Duchess.”

With a toss of her head, brown curls springing, she left the room, and the vision of her was imprinted on Magnus’ eyelid. He rubbed his eye as he rang the bell for Williams to return. Evanora couldn’t be a distraction, not when he had so many other things to do.

Chapter Five

As the weeks passed, Evanora became more than an imprint on his eyelid. He did his best to ignore her presence, but she changed his life in small ways. There were now fresh flowers blooming in vases around the house, he went about his business accompanied by fragments of music, and she even dusted off the old pianoforte. After a good cleaning, and some vigorous tuning, she played and sang in between her other duties. Music became a backdrop to his work, and he found himself noticing whenever it was missing.

She also, while adhering to his command that there be no gardener, took it on herself to restore the gardens. While it wasn't strictly appropriate that his wife kneel on the ground weeding and planting, he saw no reason to prevent her, until she re-entered the Castle dizzy and burned after hours in the sun.

"Evanora," he said upon catching sight of her trying to mount the stairs. She gazed at him in a dazed fashion and he realized he had, for the first time, addressed her by her first name. "Are you all right?"

"I'm quite—" She blinked and swayed. "Goodness, why are there two of you?"

"Sunstroke," he said grimly, slipping his arm around her waist. Her skin was hot to the touch even under her dress. "What possessed you to go out in the heat of the day?"

"I was just trying to—"

"Damage yourself?" When she didn't move, he tossed her into his arms in one smooth movement. She was light and soft, smelling slightly of lavender, and her hair tickled his chin. "For God's sake, Evanora, I won't stop you from doing as you will in the garden, but I

won't have you damaging yourself."

"This is absolutely unnecessary," she said faintly.

"I beg to differ."

She rested her head against his shoulder as he climbed the stairs shouting for Mrs. Clement. The gesture shocked him, and he glanced down at her face, pale under the burn. Her eyelids looked almost translucent, and dark lashes fanned down onto her cheeks.

"You'll be all right," he said as he entered her room. It smelled of her, that subtle trace of her scent in the air that made him even more aware of how she felt pressed against his body. "You just need to rest."

Mrs. Clement appeared in the doorway, hands fluttering. "What's the matter, Your Grace?"

"Her Grace has sunstroke," he said shortly. "Run her a bath of cold water."

"At once, Your Grace."

He laid her on the bed carefully and took one of her hands in both of his. Her eyes opened, hazel green and utterly haunting. "You're being unaccountably kind to me," she said. "Am I dreaming?"

"Do your dreams consist of my kindness?"

An arch smile spread across her lips. "I couldn't tell you what my dreams consist of, Your Grace."

Damn the woman. And damn him, too, for smiling over her like an idiot. "You may be assured, as soon as you're well again, I shall return to being the husband you've come to know."

"Will you call me *Duchess* again?"

"Only if you provoke me."

"I appear to do so frequently," she said, closing her eyes.

"I've never met anyone as infuriating as you," he said with total honesty. "Nor anyone as determined. Keep looking at me, Evanora."

"I'm quite all right, you know." She tried to sit up, but dizziness overtook her and she fell back against the pillows. "It'll pass shortly."

"It'll pass with a cold bath, whenever it materializes," he muttered, glaring at the door. The lack of servants was, generally, a small inconvenience. Today, however, he'd have gritted his teeth and paid for an entire army if they could have brought a bath up any sooner.

"I'm so very hot," she said, pressing a trembling hand to her cheeks. "Would you—could you loosen my dress a little?"

Genuine concern battled the want that took hold of his body. "Of course," he said shortly. "Allow me."

It was the work of a moment to undo her dress and ease it from her shoulders. The sun had speckled her shoulders with freckles, but below the edge of her dress, her skin was pale underneath its flush. Without waiting for permission, he unlaced her stays and tossed them aside.

The sight of her lying before him in just her chemise ignited every nerve. Her breasts swelled with every breath, and the chemise, damp with sweat, had molded itself to her body. Everything was revealed: the peaked nipples, the flat lines of her stomach, her thighs, and there, where his gaze was drawn to, the apex of her legs. His mouth dried at the thought of what he could do, of what he *wanted* to do there.

"Magnus," she whispered.

The sound of his name on her lips set fire to his nerves. He froze, sending his gaze back up the face gazing at him with wide eyes and sun-stung lips. He hadn't known how musical his name could sound until she'd said it. The thought of it sent a lance of desire through him.

He wanted nothing more than to kiss her. Roughly. Passionately. For his name to be gasped in pleasure, not in confusion. In short, he wanted everything he couldn't have.

"Oh," Evanora's lady's maid said from the doorway. "Pray excuse me, Your Grace, Mrs. Clement sent me straight up."

With self-control he didn't know he possessed, he wrenched his gaze from Evanora. From his wife. "No, of course," he said, adjusting himself as he stood. "See to it she's kept cool and if there's any change in her condition, let me know at once."

The lady's maid curtsied, the beginnings of a smile toying around her mouth. "Of course, Your Grace."

He hurried from the chamber and downstairs into the library, where he paced the floor. It had gone too far. *He* had gone too far. Though she wasn't repulsed by him—a miracle in itself—he couldn't expect her be in any way attracted to him. If he allowed himself to drown in the molten depths of her eyes, if he allowed his desire for her to overwhelm him, he was setting himself up for disaster. His best course of action was to avoid her as much as he could.

Perhaps the best thing to do was invite Peter to stay. With another man in the house, she'd be less of a distraction. Perhaps he'd even want her less if he had some other company. He cursed, slumping into a chair. From the way his body reacted still now, he had little hope it would work.



Evanora slept through until the evening, when she awoke in darkness. Momentarily confused, she blinked. Her memories of the previous day were hazy, but there was one that stood out: her husband undressing her and devouring her with the heated weight of his gaze. She hadn't known what had possessed her to ask him to remove her dress—perhaps she had been delirious—but in that moment, with his hands skating down her sides and all her senses honing onto even the tiniest brush, all she'd wanted was for him to touch her again.

She rubbed her eyes, trying to scrub away the image of him leaning over her, when she noticed a slit of warm light spilling across the carpet. The door between her chamber and the Duke's was cracked open. Faint splashing sounds followed the light.

Curiosity getting the better of her, she climbed out of bed, her hair loose around her shoulders, and she curled her fingers around the door. With a deep breath, she peered into his chamber. The Duke rose from a bath in the corner of her vision. Steam billowed from his skin, gleaming wet as he stepped out of the tub.

Heavens, she should look away, but she'd never seen a man like this before, all rugged edges and hard lines. Time had rendered her accustomed to the Duke's scar on his face, but there were other scars littered across his body like grains of grass. Rather than revulsion, like she might have supposed to feel, she wanted to touch them. Hunger, a need that rose from her core, swamped her as she watched the way his muscles corded and tightened as he moved.

And then lower, past the ridged muscle of his stomach, to what hung below.

Panting, she whipped away and pressed her back against the wall. Snooping like this was wrong, and though she'd never known a man could hold so much beauty—she'd never known she could be as intrigued, as desperate for his attention as she was now—she should *not* be spying on his private moments.

She left the room, clattering against the door as she went. There was no reason this should change their relationship, which had eased into comfortable companionship. A cool glass of water would calm her pounding heart, and help her forget about the way water beaded on his chest, and dripped lower, to his stomach and the arrow that pointed—

“Evanora?”

Be still, my heart.

She turned, plastering a smile on her face. “Your Grace,” she said in breathless accents that weren't hers at all. Although he'd quickly dressed, his shirt was partially open, revealing the plane of his chest, and the material clung to his still-wet skin. His hair, darkened by water, dripped down his forehead.

“I heard you rise. Are you quite well?” His eye roved across her face. “You're flushed.”

“I merely wanted a drink of water.”

“Then please, Evanora, allow me.”

If she'd been in her right mind, she would have corrected him into using a more formal term of address, but the truth was she liked the

way his deep voice caressed her name.

Lord, she was flushing even more.

“Thank you,” she said, adding, “Magnus.”

He stilled, just for a moment, before continuing on his way out.



Breakfast was constrained. Even the sight of him fully dressed couldn't erase the image in her mind of his body, slick and dripping, in the candlelight. The Duke, too, seemed equally distracted, and three times attempted to drink from a glass that was already empty.

“My good friend Peter will be arriving today,” he announced, laying down a paper she was certain he hadn't been reading. “At least, I think it very likely he will arrive today, but it may be tomorrow.”

“Peter?”

“Peter Holland. You may remember him from the wedding.”

“Oh.” Aware she was disproportionately disappointed, she toyed with a spoon. “Will he be staying with us long?”

“Some time, I should think.”

Had this news come yesterday, she would have borne it with equanimity. Now, however, it felt as though this Peter's presence was shattering something fragile. Something precious.

He frowned at her. “Are you quite all right?”

“Of course,” she said, meeting his gaze. For once it wasn't his scar that caught her attention, but the bright blue of his eye, like the arching sky at the height of summer. “I imagine I'm still tired from yesterday.”

“I hope you've learned your lesson about gardening in the midday sun.”

Perhaps if she fainted, he might care for her as he had done the

previous day. Gooseflesh erupted at the thought.

Goodness, what has come over me? Last week he was a mere companion, and now—

Well, now she was less fascinated by his scar and more interested in the mobile mouth underneath it. The only man who'd ever tried to kiss her before was Lord Lore, back before she'd had her eyes opened to his true character. Kissing itself hadn't been unpleasant, but his roving hands and improper advances had made the entire experience uncomfortable.

With the Duke, however, she suspected it would be different.

"Evanora," he said, his voice strangled. She raised her gaze to his single eye. "I should—"

Without going as far as to tell her what he should do, he pushed back his plate and left the room, leaving Evanora with a growing sense of dissatisfaction.



Peter Holland had not anticipated seeing both Magnus and his wife greeting him with such self-conscious constraint. It was clear Magnus was taking pains not to look at the woman beside him—a woman whom, Peter was forced to confess, was a burgeoning beauty—it was evident something had happened between them. When Magnus had informed him of the impending marriage, he had claimed it would be a marriage of convenience. This, to Peter's eye, did not appear to be quite as cold as Magnus had given him leave to assume.

"Tell me," he said as soon as he got his friend alone, "how does your wife fare?"

The scar and eyepatch had always made it difficult for Peter to read Magnus' thoughts, but the tightening of his mouth said more than any words could. "You saw her yourself," he said.

"Very true." Peter rested his boot on his knee, reflecting in distant pride on the excellent shine his man had brought from the leather. "She's looking well. I hadn't anticipated her being such a beauty."

“A beauty.” Magnus seemed struck with the thought, his fingers drumming on his thigh. “Yes, I suppose she is.”

“You didn’t think so?”

“She certainly is more taking than I’d been given reason to believe.”

Peter laughed. “Yes, Lord Lore did his best to blacken her, although I don’t believe she appeared to advantage in society as much as she does here. You should be careful, though.”

“How so?”

He examined his sleeves, flicking an invisible speck of dirt from them. It was too much to imagine Magnus would ever wait with bated breath, but any anticipation he could draw from the man who would help his cause. “Because,” he said deliberately, “a woman like that could prove a distraction.”

“She’s *helping* with the Castle, Holland.”

“Of course she is. Lord, I’m sure she’s happy to improve her ranking as a Duchess. Next she’ll be improving the rooms and bringing them up to the latest style, and then she’ll want to entertain guests here.”

“After the way society has treated her, you can’t think she’d want to engage in it again.”

“That’s precisely where you’re mistaken. The daughter of an Earl was ruined; the wife of a Duke is made. She has consequence now, and you can guarantee she will wield it as soon as she feels comfortable and confident enough to.” Peter finished his drink and placed it down. From the look on Magnus’ face, it was plain his words had found their mark. “Don’t tell me she’s drawn you in already?”

“Don’t be absurd.”

“Don’t get your heart broken, Norwood. No woman is worth the inconvenience—especially not one with such a past.”

Magnus frowned. “I suspect the rumors aren’t true.”

“Did she tell you that?” In Peter’s experience, women were prepared to say anything they could that would benefit themselves—a woman in Evanora’s position would do the same. It was only natural.

“Yes,” Magnus admitted. “Do you think she was lying?”

“Society has shunned her for six years—if I was her, I would do anything I could to assure myself of position and respect. The question more is, do you believe her to be lying?”

Magnus leaned back in his chair, steeping his fingers the way he did when he was thinking. “You’re right, I don’t yet know her well enough to give an opinion on the matter. But you may rest assured on one point: I have no intention of falling in love with my wife.”

“Until we know more, at least, I’d venture to say it’s a wise decision.”

“Yes,” Magnus murmured. “Until we know more.”

Chapter Six

W

ith Peter's arrival having consigned Magnus to the library for the near future, Evanora went for a walk. Mindful of the sun, she wore a bonnet, but her burned nose still hurt. Still, the wind was cooling, and slowly calmed her tangled thoughts.

Her response to seeing her husband naked was not an unreasonable one, she told herself. It was only natural to be curious, and despite his occasional coldness, their relationship had mellowed. Attraction, for that was undoubtedly what she felt, was a natural consequence of marriage.

Peter, on the other hand, was an unwelcome addition. That may have been in part due to the scorn with which he regarded her, or the possessiveness in his arm as he led the Duke away. He was younger than the Duke—she estimated him to be about her brother's age—but war and being at sea had hardened him.

She sat in the woodland Thomas had pointed out on their first ride, looking at the land spread out before her. It was Magnus' land, really, but it felt like hers, and being here—a place she knew him to have loved—made her feel closer to him. Beside her, lost in time and grass, two sticks lay forgotten; she liked to imagine they were the 'swords' Magnus, long ago, had played with.

Footsteps were the first thing that alerted her to someone else's presence. One hand on her hat, she looked up into the face of her husband. He looked as surprised to see her there as she felt to see him, but alongside his surprise was something else, something heated. It lingered behind the blue-and-green shards of his eye in a way that made her toes curl with anticipation.

"I apologize for interrupting you," he said, bowing hastily. "I didn't

expect to find you here.”

“You’re not interrupting at all.” She waved a hand at the land peeping through the stained-glass leaves of the trees. “I was merely admiring the view.”

He sat beside her, stretching his long legs out across the grass. “I used to come here as a boy,” he said. “I return here still, sometimes, when I want time and space to think.”

“Do you need time and space to think now?”

A smile curled his mouth. “I fancy I’ve found something better. How long have you been coming here?”

“Since Thomas told me this was a favorite haunt of yours,” she said on a laugh. “I see its appeal.”

“It was always my favorite part of living here. It offered freedoms that London never could.” He sent her a sharp glance. “Do you miss it? London?”

“I miss my father,” she admitted.

“That’s not quite the same.”

She lifted a shoulder. “London never brought me much joy. I find the countryside offers me more peace.”

“And peace is what you wish for?”

“Doesn’t everyone who’s been through hardship wish for peace?”

“Yes,” he said, his gaze roving across her face. “I believe they do.”

The air around them thickened and tightened, as if someone had pulled a string. Without thinking, she leaned toward him. There was something very masculine about the lines of his face, the tendons in his neck that became taut as she approached.

She was just looking, she told herself. It required a closer distance to properly appreciate the tiny fair hairs that coated his skin, and the

way his eyelashes faded to white at their tips. He had splendid cheekbones, sharp and edged as though they could cut glass.

“Evanora,” he murmured, but instead of a warning it sounded more like a plea. She dropped her gaze to the mouth that had uttered her name in such desperate accents, and with a gasp he leaned in and kissed her.

Lord Lore’s kiss had been nothing like this. For a start, he had run his hands across her buttocks to her breasts and squeezed roughly. It had been frightening.

Magnus was not frightening. Though he kissed her like his life depended on it, like he was a drowning man in search of air, his fingers brushed her chin with aching gentleness. His lips were hard, unyielding, but he didn’t kiss her with Lord Lore’s bruising force. Instead, he kissed her as though she was something precious; something vital he needed.

The hunger in her that his naked body had awoken rose and took hold. She opened her mouth invitingly, wrenching a low moan from his throat, and his tongue slid against hers in a way that sent heat flaring to her core.

Yes, this was what she’d wanted. Kissing was supposed to feel like fire; it was supposed to send your body aflame with burning, aching want. That want sent her arms around his waist and up his back, pressing until his body aligned against hers. He broke away almost roughly. Panting, she stared at him, at the way he frowned even though the same heated desire she felt was reflected in his eye.

“Magnus—”

“I’m not such a blackguard that I would have you here,” he said, leaning away from her. “You must know that.”

“I’m your wife, Magnus.”

“I’m well aware.”

“Then why—” She struggled against the disappointment of rejection, tears burning her eyes. “Why won’t you even look at me?”

He paused, and slowly turned his gaze back to her, the frown above his eye softening. With one hand, he brushed back an unruly curl, letting his fingers scrape across her temple. "You don't know what you're asking for."

"Credit me with a little sense," she said impatiently. "I may not be what society thinks I am, but I understand, I think, the essentials."

Another smile touched his mouth at that. "Very admirable, but even you can agree this isn't the time or the place."

"Very well," she said, adjusting her skirts. "I suppose I will be unable to negotiate with you a continuation at a more appropriate moment?"

"I'm strictly against negotiations or bargains in this department, I'm afraid," he said gravely. He hesitated and then, with aching slowness, kissed her again. She barely had time to close her eyes, to reach for him, before he pulled away.

"I must be mad," he muttered, turning to her with a rather self-conscious smile. "Please excuse me, Duchess." Without giving her time to respond—in which she certainly would have uttered the words *My Lord Duke*—he rose and strode down the hill away from her.



I must be mad.

As he re-entered the Castle, the unpleasant and insistent remnants of desire for his infernal wife lodged in the pit of his stomach, that was the only thought he could muster.

I must be mad.

He was a fool for having kissed her—not once but twice—though the way she'd leaned into him, caressing him with eyes that had turned as green as the roiling sea, would have tried a lesser man than him.

Damn it.

It was beyond the outside of enough that she should be so enticing when he knew she had little to no interest in him; no woman could

love a man as scarred as he. In truth, he was astonished she'd consented to be kissed at all, never mind attempting to seduce him into taking her on that hill, which he'd almost done—

“Norwood?” Peter emerged from the study. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing to concern you,” he said shortly.

Peter’s blue eyes assessed him. Peter was one of the few men that could see right through him, no matter what he tried to conceal; if he were to lie about the state of his relationship with Evanora, Peter would know. Better he kept it to himself for now.

“Women,” Peter said after a moment, shaking his head. “Would you like a drink?”

“No, thank you.” A cold bath would *certainly* be required before Evanora returned, whenever that was to be. “I’ll join you presently.”

Safe in his bedchamber, he let his head hang into his hands.

Doesn't everyone who's been through hardship wish for peace?

Whether Peter was right or wrong about her made little difference; he was right about the fact that Magnus would have to be careful not to let her break his heart. She was altogether too enticing, too unconsciously sensual, too *bright* like a gleam of sunlight through clouds, for him to remain indifferent toward her without effort.

I suppose I will be unable to negotiate with you a continuation at a more appropriate moment?

Good God, she was a siren with no idea what those words, and what intent that lay behind them, could do to a man. Even recalling them, and the way her cheeks had flushed after their kiss, the taste of her on his tongue—everything served to reignite the passion that common sense and distance had curdled.

But resist it he must. After all, when the immediate appeal of being a duchess had faded, and when she'd returned to town a lady with the ton at her feet, what use could she have for a disfigured man as her husband?

The answer, as he well knew, was none at all.



As time passed, and Magnus remained infuriatingly distant, Evanora threw herself into restoration of the house. Under Peter's watchful gaze, because he always seemed to be somewhere watching, she transformed the dingy rooms into bright, inviting spaces in which she could play, sing, and dream of entertaining.

The bedchambers, too, she addressed, replacing worn drapes with new ones, and presenting Magnus with the projected expenses of the improvements. He made no protest, but she had the sense she lost his trust with every alteration.

"Good morning, Duchess," Peter drawled from the doorway of the drawing room. She looked up from the pianoforte where she'd been practicing. "May I compliment you on your playing."

"Why, thank you. I've had many years in which to learn," she said dryly, turning back to her music.

"I'm certain you did."

The inflection in his voice irritated her, and she looked back up at his bland smile. "Was there anything you wanted, Mr. Holland?"

"I merely thought I should further get to know the wife of my friend." Instead of leaving, as she'd hoped he would, he sat on the sofa as though he owned it, placing his ankle on his knee. The arrogance of the gesture irritated her, and she chewed the inside of her lip to prevent herself from saying so. Really, she had no reason to dislike him except a slight coldness toward her.

And, of course, the way he'd monopolized Magnus' attention, which after their kiss—something that still sent tingles down to her fingertips—was particularly unwelcome.

"It all happened so fast," he continued, "don't you agree?"

She turned back to the piano and continued to play. "Indeed it did."

“Do you miss your life in London?”

“What do you suppose me to miss?” she asked sharply. “The rumors or the condemnation? I assure you I miss neither.”

“My apologies, Your Grace, I had no wish to offend.” His eyes, so very different from Magnus’ though they were ostensibly the same color, assessed her. “The Duke informed me the rumors aren’t true. If that’s so, Lord Lore was cruel indeed.”

Her fingers stumbled across the notes and she caught her breath. “Do you believe them to be untrue?”

“My friend’s word is good enough for me.”

“An admirable sentiment.”

“And a true one.” With a creak, he leaned forward. “Might I be frank?”

“I suspect you will be regardless of my permission,” she said with a wry smile.

“I had thought Norwood’s—that is, the Duke’s—marriage to you was a mistake. *Especially* when he said he hadn’t met you prior to the event, but—” He spread his hands. “I’m forced to acknowledge I was mistaken. If I was ever unwelcoming to you, please accept my sincere apology.”

A rather more genuine smile spread across her face. “Thank you, Mr. Holland. You’re right in that our marriage was sudden. It will have surprised many, I think.”

“I believe Lord Lore is especially concerned about your welfare.”

She snatched her hands from the pianoforte and glanced at him, shock in her eyes. “Indeed?”

“He has expressed uncertainty about whether the Duke is treating you with respect, given your history and the rumors about his character.”

“No doubt another scheme to torment me,” she murmured, but though

her fingers hovered over the keys, she didn't resume playing. "He always did prefer it when I was on the sidelines."

"Fear not, Your Grace, you're safe here."



The Duke and Duchess had yet to return to town. Luther tapped his fingers against his cards as he contemplated the matter. Usually, a couple would return to London to see out the remainder of the season, but a full month had gone by with no sign of them.

That the Duke of Norwood had little inclination for society had been evident these past five years. That Evanora, too, was content to remain in obscurity after so many years of being a social outcast he found hard to believe. The Evanora *he* knew, the Evanora who'd fallen in love with him, had loved every ball, every night at the opera. She'd loved to dazzle him and everyone else with her artless beauty; she might not have known at the time from where her pleasure stemmed, but he knew it was from admiration.

For her to submit willingly to being shut away in Norwood Castle, alarming reports about the state of which were now being circulated, beggared belief. He, for one, didn't believe it. On an adjoining table, eyes narrowed in concentration, Evanora's brother—by the name of Charles, if he recalled correctly—played faro with the air of a man who'd dipped too deep.

"Excuse me," Luther said to his companions, and joined Charles' table. The boy glanced up with a frown, but otherwise said nothing as he joined the game. After a few rounds, in which Luther noted Charles' losses only increased, he tapped the table with a long finger. "Devil's in your luck tonight, Rathbone," he said.

Charles took a sip of wine. "I didn't know you frequented White's, Lord Lore."

"I've been known to, on occasion. Tell me, have you heard much from your sister?"

"Evanora?" Charles eyed Luther suspiciously. "Why would I have heard from her? She's *married*." He said the word rather as though he might expect her to have dropped off the end of the earth.

“Of course,” Luther murmured. “I had merely thought—considering she was such a devoted sister—however, I see I’ve wasted your time. My apologies.”

Charles caught Luther’s sleeve. “Now, there’s no need to be hasty,” he said, the beginnings of a slur between his words. “What do you mean you’d expect to hear from her even though she’s married?”

“Why, only that I have three sisters, and each one kept regular correspondence after they married. Regretfully, it’s I that neglected the correspondence.”

“So I should have heard from Evanora?”

“I’m surprised if you haven’t.”

“I am a notoriously bad writer,” Charles confided. Wine hung heavy on his breath. By Luther’s estimation, he had likely been drinking a good many hours. “Perhaps she thought I wouldn’t reply.”

“Perhaps.” Luther let a note of doubt into his voice. “That, or, of course, the Duke of Norwood doesn’t want her corresponding with anyone.”

That caught Charles’ attention. “Why would he want to do that?”

Luther shrugged elegantly. “Why did he want to marry her in the first place?”

A mistake... Charles glared at him with renewed suspicion. “That’s a question I could ask you, Lore, when you did all you could to destroy her reputation.”

“I see I’ve offended you,” he said smoothly, standing. “Please accept my best wishes for your family’s health and happiness.”

Charles struggled to formulate a response as Luther walked away. If he’d timed it right, and he knew a lot about the perils of intoxication, Charles wouldn’t remember their encounter the next morning. He would hopefully, however, remember his concern for the welfare of his sister. If the rumors he’d been sending into the ton’s mouths spurred him into action, Charles might be persuaded to do something

about his sister's position.

Evanora had bettered herself unacceptably, and he would foil her ascension if it was the last thing he did.

Chapter Seven

As a lady's maid, Johanna had a series of duties. Most of them involved seeing to Evanora's clothes, dressing, and various other tasks.

None of them involved gardening. Yet here she was, dirt crammed up her nails despite the gloves Evanora had procured for her, grubbing around in flowerbeds.

"You know it's not proper for a lady to do this," she grumbled. Friends with Evanora from such a young age, she felt no need to treat her with the same level of deference most lady's maids did. "You should leave it to the gardeners."

"The Duke doesn't wish to employ gardeners," Evanora said primly. Her face was under the shade of a large straw hat, but the sun had brought out freckles across her nose. Johanna would have to make up some lemon juice later to put on them, in the hopes they might fade.

"In which case, you ought to leave the garden be."

Evanora leaned back from the rose she was pruning. It was, apparently, a little late in the season to be pruning roses, but considering the thorns straggled across the path, it was necessary. "You know I loved gardening back at home."

"Yes, when you pruned some roses and directed where the new flowers should be put."

"This is not all that different."

Johanna huffed a sigh. In her opinion, it was *very* different, and the Duke wouldn't be pleased to see Evanora dirtying all her dresses like a

commoner. Johnna wasn't entirely sure what the Duke liked—if indeed he liked anything—but she was certain it wouldn't be muddy knees. Or freckles.

“Have you spoken to the Duke much lately?” she asked cautiously. “You know, since you—”

“What do you think?” Evanora tilted her head to one side as she examined the bush she'd aggressively pruned. “It'll be a riot of color in no time at all.”

“I asked about the Duke.”

“We speak only at dinner, as you well know. How many times will you ask me that question?”

Johanna smiled mischievously. “Until you give a different answer.”

“He's—” Evanora hesitated, a flush creeping up her neck. Johnna marked it with silent satisfaction. “I don't believe he's interested in me, Jo. Not really. I keep thinking after the kiss, but—”

“Perhaps he has reasons for keeping away?”

“I thought perhaps my reputation would be a reason, but Peter Holland made it clear he believed me—or at least, believed Magnus—and still no change.”

“He's been in town for the past fortnight. Perhaps he didn't have time to speak to the Duke before he left.”

“I believe they write regularly.” She sighed. “I'm resigned to the fact my husband isn't attracted to me.”

“He kissed you,” Johanna said firmly. “Men don't kiss women they're not attracted to.”

Evanora's hazel eyes twinkled. “And how would you know that?”

“I'm by no means an expert, but I know men well enough to say that with confidence. The question isn't whether he wants you, it's whether he feels anything for you.” Johanna glanced up at the sun. “Come, it's

reaching the heat of the day, and you know His Grace doesn't want you outside at these hours."

Reluctantly, Evanora drew herself up and they passed arm in arm into the house. Brisket, the butler and Johanna's arch enemy, inclined his head at Evanora. "Lunch is served in the dining room, Your Grace."

"Thank you, Brisket."

Although the dismissal clearly rankled, Brisket drew himself up and walked in the direction of the library, where His Grace was likely to be found. Johanna longed to see them at lunch together, to see them interact, but there were some formalities they adhered to; Johanna ate in the kitchen with the rest of the staff, and Evanora took her meals in the dining room.

As Johanna made her way to the kitchen, Brisket caught up with her. Elderly and entirely gray, the burst of effort made him almost completely out of breath.

"You are too familiar with Her Grace."

It was an accusation Johanna was familiar with, having received it several times since their arrival. "I'm her friend as well as lady's maid, Sir."

"It's not proper. She's entirely above your station."

"As long as Her Grace encourages my friendship and familiarity, I will continue to provide it." She bobbed a sarcastic curtsy and left him at the entrance to the kitchen—a place filled with her friends. Mrs. White, a veritable dragon, had been tamed by Evanora several weeks ago, and Mrs. Clement was a steadfast supporter of the new duchess. Anything Evanora put her mind to do, as long as it wasn't too outrageous, was backed wholeheartedly by them.



Magnus wasn't in the habit of taking all his meals in the dining room. Often, he'd ask for a tray of something be taken to the library. The lure of Evanora, however, although he didn't allow her to be a lure, was too much to overcome.

And so he had, for the past several weeks, taken lunch with her too. She'd always burst in, as though the arrival of lunch had taken her by surprise, with rosy cheeks and sun-kissed skin. He'd never been one for the prevailing fashion of pale. The robust tan she was acquiring, and the bleached wisps of blonding hair that framed her face only brought more sweetness to her eyes.

"Have you had a profitable morning?" she asked, as she did every day.

"More or less. How is the garden progressing?" He eyed her. "Am I right in saying you've recruited your lady's maid to work in the gardens with you?"

A blush settled on her cheekbones, and she looked up at him self-consciously. "Only in the mornings," she assured him. "I know it's not quite the done thing, but only fancy—we've almost completed the rose garden."

"Indeed."

"If you'd like, we could walk out together and I could show it to you."

As always, he was aware of that irresistible tug toward her, as though his gut lurched in her direction every time she suggested they spend time together.

Peter had, before he'd left, recommended Magnus be careful around her: "I do believe she's not what society made her out to be, and I'll confess she's unusually charming, but you ought to be careful you don't let her charm you too far. A fellow doesn't want to be in love with his wife if he can help it—it's a damned uncomfortable thing."

Magnus had no intention of being in love with Evanora, but he was forced to admit she made that task particularly difficult.

"I'm busy this afternoon," he said curtly, looking back down at his place so he didn't see the way her face fell. "Please excuse me."

Without another glance at his wife, he left the room.



Evanora draped a shawl over her arms to stave off the cold as she wandered through the garden she was slowly bringing to life. Even her joy at the fragrant new blooms couldn't stem her rising disappointment that Magnus, rather than spending time with her, went out of his way to avoid her at any given moment. After their kiss she'd thought—

Well, she'd thought wrong, that was all.

She tipped her head up and gazed at the light of the library streaming across the grass. The Castle, complete with clambering ivy, had grown dear to her in a way she couldn't have conceived when she'd arrived. Having her own household to run, seeing the way the rooms and garden came to life under her careful command, was certainly part of it.

The strong man that slept in the adjoining room, whose lips she could still feel pressed against hers whenever she closed her eyes, was the other part, although given his constant dismissal of her, it was a galling one. Nevertheless, she was not a woman to be easily daunted. If the Duke did indeed want her—and Johanna's authority on the subject made her believe he did—something more might come in time. She just had to encourage him to speak to her.

Tucking her shawl over her arm, she wandered down the path to the lake. A weeping willow dangled lacy branches over the water, and along the bank stood a dilapidated summerhouse. She'd only recently discovered it, but since she had, she'd come here almost every night to watch the sunset glow against the water.

When she found Magnus already in the summerhouse, elbows braced against the balustrade overlooking the water, she caught her breath. He rarely looked as easy as he did here, the long length of him relaxed and assured.

Her first instinct was to stand and watch him for a moment longer, so she could appreciate the broad width of his shoulders and the trimness of his waist, but he glanced at her. "Have I interrupted?" he asked, moving as if to leave.

"Please." She held out a hand before curling it into a fist. "Are you so averse to seeing me?"

“Averse? No.”

“Then stay.” She stepped up into the summerhouse and rested her elbows on the balustrade, just as he’d been doing. “What were you thinking just now, before I intruded?”

He smiled wryly. “Rather dull things, I’m afraid. I was contemplating how many fish were in the lake and whether I could attempt to fish here again. I believe it was once well stocked.”

“My father used to love fishing.”

“Are you lonely here, Evanora?” The question was rather fast, as though it burst from him unintentionally. “That is to say... are you happy?”

“Should I not be?”

He took a while to answer, and she looked down at his hands, clenching and unclenching. If she’d been more daring, she might have straightened them herself; as it was, she merely allowed herself to look.

“I mean to say,” he said, “I know you have no female companion. I can arrange for one to stay, if you’d rather.”

“I have Johanna,” she said sharply. “She is all the companionship and company I need.”

An eyebrow raised. “Your lady’s maid?”

“She’s my friend.”

“I see.”

“If you’re regretting marrying me, Magnus, I wish you’d just say so. If you want me to leave, or return to town, then I can do so. But if I’m to stay here, bringing some aged aunt to stay—or Heaven forbid my Aunt Augusta—is the opposite of what I want.”

A tiny smile quirked the edge of his mouth at that. “Is your Aunt Augusta so very bad?”

That didn't answer her question, but the smile was promising, so she merely tilted her head and said, "It was my duty to accompany her to balls and the like, in the absence of other unattached female members of the family to do so for her. Charles often accompanied us, but you can imagine how frequently he remained by her side."

"Indeed."

"She was also somewhat deaf, and at a ball when everyone was coming and going and the music's playing, I had to shout to get myself heard." A bitter smile twisted her lips. "My role was largely to fetch her drinks and help her walk from one side of the ballroom to the other, when she saw an acquaintance or when she wanted some air."

He tapped his fingers against the wood. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" she inquired. "You were hardly to blame for that juncture in my life."

"I suppose," he said, his voice dark, "Lord Lore carries the burden of blame on his shoulders."

She laughed brittlely. "I hardly think he considered it a burden. Lord Lore gloried in my every humiliation."

Magnus was silent, a muscle tightening in his jaw. From her angle, she could barely see the scar that burst from under his eyepatch and stretched across his face.

"I wonder," he said after a moment, "Lord Lore could hold such a sustained grudge and not feel—feel pity."

"Why, do you?"

He didn't answer.

Impulsively, she reached over and put her hand across his. "Lord Lore has no hold over me now. You saved me from that. And—whether or not I show it—I am grateful."

Every muscle tight, he glanced down at her hand; she was conscious of a wish to snatch it from his, but instead she stilled her own body.

Her heart hiccupped up her chest into the base of her throat.

“Tell me,” she said, her voice too high-pitched, “how did you receive that scar? You’ve never spoken about the war.”

He sighed, but her question had succeeded at tearing his attention from his hand, which remained under hers. “War is a terrible thing,” he said. “The things you see—the things I’ve seen—”

“Please, tell me.”

“This is not a story for a lady.”

“Then pretend I’m no lady.” He made no answer and she frowned, biting her lip as she searched for the biggest expression of vulnerability she could find. “My mother died when I was eighteen. She died believing Lord Lore was to be my husband and that I would be happy. Every day of unhappiness since then has been a source of both guilt—that I could never be what she wanted—and relief that she didn’t see what I became.”

“No mother could fail to be proud of you,” he said.

“Perhaps, perhaps not. I’ve married well, in the end, but she would want me to be happy.” She searched his gaze. “How can I understand you if you never tell me about your past?”

“Do you really wish to know? It’s not a pleasant story.”

“We are husband and wife, Magnus, no matter what you think about it, and I have every wish to understand my husband.”

He sighed. “It was six years ago in the Peninsular War. We were fighting over the river, and in the battle, a soldier came at me from the side. I was already engaged with another, and I wouldn’t have been able to protect myself, but Norman Holland—Peter’s elder brother—saw me to be in danger. He did everything I could not, and he gave his life for mine while I was left only with this scar on my face as penance.”

Evanora’s heart ached at the pain in his voice. “You mustn’t feel as though you should pay penance.”

“He chose that I should live and he should not.”

“He gave up his life for a friend. How many of us would do that if we could? What honor there is in sacrifice—and such honor I’m sure he felt.”

Magnus looked at her then, bleakness in his blue eye. “There is no honor in war, Evanora.”

“There’s honor in you,” she returned. “And there was honor in your friend. Would you strip the glory of his sacrifice from him?”

He stared at her. “Do you believe that?” he asked. “That there’s honor in me?”

“I know nothing of war, but I know of men, and I know honor when I see it.”

“I wish I could see the world as you do,” he murmured, gazing out once more across the lake. The last vestiges of fire from the sunset were fading now, and if she wasn’t so warm, Evanora might have shivered in the cool breeze.

“I wish you could see yourself as I see you.”

“You’ve never truly seen me, Evanora.”

“Then let me see you now.”

He shook his head. “You would not wish to, My Dear. It’s not a pleasant sight.”

“Do you really think so little of me?” she demanded. “Am I so weak-minded as to run at the sight of one little scar?”

“It’s hardly a little scar, Evanora.”

“I’ve been confronted with the sight of it every day and I haven’t yet run.”

His lips twitched. “You infuriating woman. Will you never take no for an answer?”

“Not with this, My Lord Duke.” She softened her voice. “Please, Magnus. Trust me.”

His gaze bore into hers, and on a rush of cold disappointment she thought he’d refuse again, but then he reached up, and in one smooth movement, swept the eyepatch from his face.

His eye was milky and unseeing, the scar tracing a line from the edge of his eyebrow down his face. Once, she might have thought it hideous, raised and puckered as it was—once, she might have found his eye, white pooling in his iris, unsettling—but all it represented now was the pain of a broken man.

A man she craved to soothe and heal.

In his vulnerability, in his openness, he’d never appeared to her more beautiful than he did now. The ugliness of his scar contrasted against the strong lines of his face, the promise of a smile lurking at the edge of his mobile mouth, and the emotions that crossed his blue eye like clouds across the sky.

And she was falling in love with him. The realization was a lightning strike, so sudden and electric she gasped. Magnus was difficult and problematic and troublesome, and she craved his company, his approbation, and just *him* more than she’d ever wanted anyone else. More than she’d ever wanted Luther, for all she’d thought herself so in love with him.

Magnus was different. Magnus was better. Magnus was *more*.

With a shaking hand, she reached up and touched his chin, tracing up the length of the scar until she reached his eyebrow. He stilled under her touch, though it was as fleeting and gentle as a butterfly’s wing.

“I can’t conceive the pain this must have caused you,” she said, her voice choking. “The blow must have cut your face open.”

“Are you not repulsed?” he asked bitterly. “Don’t look at me with pity, Evanora, I can’t bear it.”

She pressed her palm against his cheek and turned his face back to hers. “Not pity, Magnus.” No, she would never pity him, only admire him as fiercely as she could.

He brought his hand to her face and brushed a stray strand of hair from her mouth. "Then what?"

In answer, she reached up onto her tiptoes and kissed him, drawing his face down to hers with her hands. She cupped his cheeks as tenderly and delicately as she dared, her mouth soft on his. There was a moment when he didn't react, when she thought perhaps he wouldn't, but then he slid his hands around her waist and pressed her against him and she closed her eyes in relief.

This had been what she'd dreamed of in the weeks since their last kiss. The hunger that had lain dormant in her belly now rose and consumed her. She burned for him, and every kiss he pressed against her mouth—every inch of her back his hands explored—only added to the flames.

With daring she didn't know she possessed, she ran her palms down his back and across to his chest and the muscles she'd glimpsed there so long ago. She investigated them greedily; the strong muscles under his collarbones, the hard ridges of his stomach, and further down, until he grabbed her hands and brought them back up to his chest.

He pushed her against the balustrade, his chest against hers, one leg pressed between her legs. Following instinct, she arched her back into him and gyrated her hips, sending pleasure skittering across her skin. It was so vivid, so intense, that she gasped, and he moved back, his face shadowed in the encroaching darkness.

"God, Evanora." The way he said her name sounded both like a plea and a prayer. "We should stop. We should—"

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she kissed him again, and he gave in with a growl that sent yet more heat plunging into her core.

Yes, this was what she needed. It was him, his hands tangling in her hair, tugging the length of it down over her shoulders until she looked like a nymph in the dusky light. It was the scent of him, musky yet sweet, all over her. It was the taste of his tongue, the feel of his thigh rubbing against that place between her legs she'd never known had held such secrets.

He nipped her lip and she moaned. Something pressed against her stomach, a rod that throbbed with her every gasp, her every breath.

His hand, splayed at the small of her back, kept her pressed against him—against it.

With urgency born of desperation, he ran his hand up and across her breast. She arched her back into his hand, silently begging him for more. He gave it, circling the sensitive flesh of her nipples through her dress, kissing down her neck as she let her head hang back and let herself drown in pleasure.

If this was what it meant to be wanton—though of course, she was with her husband—then she understood. If this had been something she'd known before, perhaps she would have submitted to Luther's advances.

He'd never been like this, though. He hadn't worshipped her with every touch, with every kiss. He hadn't whispered her name against her damp skin, and sent heat flickering through every nerve. Luther hadn't made her body come alive the way Magnus could.

"Please," she begged, though she didn't know what she begged for. Just for release, for the throbbing want between her legs to be appeased. She pressed herself against his thigh, tiny mewls escaping her lips at the sheer sensation of it.

His eye dark, Magnus lifted her dress, skating a hand up her thigh. She gripped his shoulders as he toyed with the soft skin there, drawing patterns that grew every closer to the part of her she wanted—no, needed—him to touch.

Finally, a smile of triumph curving his lips at her moan, he slipped a finger into her wetness. Sheer sensation, more intense than anything yet, washed through her in a wave of pleasure. At the intimacy of it, and the overwhelming pleasure, she froze.

"What are you doing?" she said, grabbing at his arm. His hand stilled. "Magnus, wait."

"Does it hurt?"

"Hurt? No." She blinked, trying to clear the fog in her mind. That place his fingers still lingered throbbed with insistent desire, and instinct had her grinding against him before she caught herself. "That's just to say—"

He moved, so his body pressed against hers, trapping his arm between them. His lips hovered an inch above hers. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“I won’t hurt you.”

As he said it, his fingers moved in insistent circles. Shock battled with desire, but the tension that tugged at her, heat that sank deep into her core, loosened her limbs. She didn’t want him to stop, she wanted him to inch her closer—to what, she didn’t know, but she needed it.

Magnus wrapped an arm around her, holding her upright as he kissed the moans from her mouth.

She pulled away as the heat built. “Magnus,” she said on a gasp. “Magnus, it’s—”

“Do you trust me?”

As he flicked his finger across the sensitive nub he’d been circling, she sagged back against him. Liquid moans slid from partially opened lips. “Yes,” she moaned.

“Then let go.”

Let go.

Evanora released the last of her inhibitions and relaxed into him as he drew his fingers through her slickness one last time.

She shattered. The release she craved flared across her body in an explosion of heat that stopped her lungs. Maybe it stopped her heart, or perhaps the entire world. All she knew was this pleasure, encouraged by his clever fingers, washing over her in waves that slowly faded.

Replete, she sagged against him, listening to the pounding of his heart that matched the shaking force of her heartbeat. “That was—” There were no words to describe what she’d experienced. “Thank you.”

He laughed against her hair, his breath tickling the nape of her neck.

“There’s nothing to thank me for. Did you enjoy it?”

“Yes.” She looked up at him with wide eyes, her gaze tracing the features she’d come to know so well. “Have we—that is to say, was that—?”

“Not quite, My Love. Come, we should return.”

The rod against her stomach throbbed again, and her brows pulled into a frown. “Should we—”

“Not now.” He kissed her, long and sweet, and she melted like ice in the sun. Her arm entwined in his, they made their way back to the Castle.

Chapter Eight

The ballroom was alight with gossip, but Charles Rathbone seemed either oblivious or unaffected. Luther silently raged behind his mask. He'd courted several young women that were all vapid smiles and no conversation; none could compete with Evanora, who even as an outcast had offered wit and spirit.

He was absurd that he should miss her, and miss the power he held over her, but he'd slowly come to the conclusion that one of his greatest pleasures had been seeing Evanora in society. Knowing that her fall had been caused entirely by him; loving and hating in equal measure that she despised him.

He prowled around the edge of the ballroom, ignoring several inviting smiles. Charles was nowhere to be seen. His plan wasn't working. The Duke and Duchess of Norwood had not yet arrived in town, although should they arrive, nigh-on scandal would await them. He'd ensured that.

Still, he needed to do something more to endanger their marriage, which he was rapidly suspecting was content if not happy. That she'd contentment outside of his reach was galling; that she was with another man after she'd refused him was insulting.

She needed to pay, and whatever it took, he'd find a way of making it happen.



It took all of Magnus' willpower not to visit Evanora's bedchamber that evening. It was likely she expected it—and she had good right to—but if he were to give into the part of him that wanted her more than he wanted to breathe, he'd never get that piece back.

And so, he lay awake in his bed, staring at the ceiling, burningly aware that she was lying just a few yards from him in their adjoining room. It would be the matter of a moment to rise and enter through their shared door, which at that moment was open a crack. Perhaps she'd left it open to lure him in.

No, he was sure luring him wasn't her goal. She was an innocent; the way she'd held his arm, eyes wide with lust and shock at the way he'd touched her—the way she'd gasped and moaned and shuddered, and the way he'd instructed her to allow release to take her—had shown him that beyond all doubt. Experienced women didn't have the same level of endearing, charming, sensual confusion at the way their bodies responded to the touch of a man.

And how she'd responded to him.

He groaned and rolled over. It was going to be a long night.

Unfortunately, when the next day brought them together at breakfast, he suspected it would be a long day, too. There was a new awareness about her, a self-consciousness about her as she smiled at him and made conversation.

He ought to dismiss her. After so many weeks of repelling her every advance, it should be easy.

And yet—

"What are your plans today, Magnus?" she asked, taking a small bite of toast. He was enchanted by her mouth—the way it closed around the toast, the shape of it, the sounds that came from it—

He really needed to get a hold of himself.

"I was intending visiting the brewery today," he said.

"Tell me more about the brewery. What precisely are we brewing?"

"The Norwood Brewery brews beer, My Dear. My father let it go to ruin, of course, but we've collected the barley and the hops, and our latest batch is fermenting. It'll be going to market in the next few months."

Her curls drooped onto one shoulder as she tilted her head. “Is that what my dowry went toward?”

He caught her mischievous smile before he could take offence, and a grin spread across his face. “Insolent girl.”

“Tell me, Your Grace, might you have time to ride across the Estate with me?”

This was precisely the offer he should refuse, but he found himself saying, “I can spare a few hours after lunch.”

“Excellent.” Her nose scrunched as she smiled. “I look forward to it.”

He made no reply, and was quietly fuming at his inability to control himself around her when Williams, his steward, joined him. “Is there a problem, Your Grace?” the man asked, scraping his hair off his forehead. John Williams, son of Frederick Williams, had been steward almost as long as Magnus had been alive. Most of the staff, in fact, had been hired twenty- to thirty-years ago, when the Estate had been prosperous. The servants that remained were mere remnants of a bustling castle.

Williams, however, had long had Magnus’ ear; he was a damn fine steward, and loyal, too. To have remained here through rack and ruin spelled loyalty that Magnus, one day, intended to repay.

“Nothing to worry you,” he said, forcing a smile. “How is the brewery doing?”

“Exceedingly well, Your Grace. I should think by the end of three months, we’ll have stock ready to sell and ship.”

“This is good news.” After the disaster he’d come to find at the Estate, it was about time he had good news. “Are the local boys working well?”

“They’re hard-working lads, all of them, and they’re doing you proud,” Williams said seriously. Born and bred in the area, Magnus knew the welfare of the surrounding villages was very close to Williams’ heart.

“Excellent. I’m glad to hear it.”

The brewery was a large, timbered building likely built in the late seventeenth century. Low beams, flaked with age, ran along the ceiling and down the walls, and the plaster had been roughly whitewashed to protect it from the elements. When he’d arrived at the Estate, the roof had partially fallen in, and damp had rotted away large portions of the floor.

Now, as he walked in, he saw the floor had been entirely replaced, and large barrels with the fermenting beer were crammed into the area. A kiln was in full use at the other end of the large building, and that, combined with the heat from the mashing process, made the air thick and stuffy.

The chatter stopped as workers saw who’d come to visit. “Welcome, Your Grace,” one of the men said, stepping forward. A grizzled man, he’d been tending to the brewery during its dying days, and Magnus had reinstated him as soon as he’d decided to re-open the brewery.

“Thank you. Things are coming along well, I hear.”

“Indeed they are, Your Grace. Exceedingly well.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Fully engaged in asking questions about the brewery, the different stages of brewing, and getting to know his men on a personal level, Magnus contrived to barely think about Evanora at all. Perhaps this was what a man needed: beer and the absence of a woman. Or at least, a distraction from the woman. If he could but keep his distance from her, he’d be able to protect his heart without fear.



Evanora had been left both disappointed and confused when Magnus had refused to visit her the previous night, and she blamed her lack of focus—on her book, the pianoforte, what Mrs. Clement was saying—on the resulting lack of sleep.

“Do hold still,” Johanna said as she attempted, for the third time, to pin some flowers in her hair. Identifying a note of genuine frustration, Evanora gripped the dressing table and remained motionless as the final bloom was pinned to her curls.

“Do you think he’ll like it?” she asked, also for the third time.

“I think he’d been a fool not to.”

“Perhaps.” She twisted her fingers anxiously together. “Perhaps I’ve been too forward.”

Johanna placed her hands on Evanora’s shoulders and looked her in the eyes seriously. “Evanora, My Dear, you are his *wife*.”

“I’m aware of that, Johanna.”

“Then you’re aware of how ridiculous you sound. It’s not forward for a wife to desire her husband.”

“Johanna,” Evanora scolded in a whisper, glancing at the empty doorway as though it was a shameful secret hordes of servants were listening to. “You can’t just... say it.”

“I believe I can,” Johanna said dryly. “Now, go down to lunch and charm your husband. We both know you’re more than capable.”

Evanora did not feel more than capable. She felt, rather, as fresh-faced and naïve as a debutante at her first ball, aiming to attract a wealthy husband with no real idea of how to go about it.

Some girls were practiced in the art of flirtation. Evanora was not one of those girls.

“Magnus,” she said as they met outside the dining room. “Have you had a pleasant morning?”

“Odd, you usually refer to it as a profitable morning.”

“I knew the brewery would be profitable at breakfast—I now desire to know whether visiting it brought you pleasure.”

He glanced down at her, a quick look, but there nevertheless. “Yes, it did. Have you had a profitable morning?”

He’d made no comment about her hair, but as they parted to sit at the opposite end of the table—an infernal tradition—his gaze skated

across her rose dress and the matching petals amid her curls. She smiled. “Perfectly so, thank you. Where would you like to ride this afternoon?”

Another pause, this time lengthier. He frowned, the expression pooling between his eyebrows. His lips thinned. His knuckles clenched, before he smoothed his features and returned her smile. “I have nowhere in mind specifically.”

“I believe I saw a folly at the other end of the Estate. I’ve yet to explore it.”

“Ah, yes, another of my father’s ventures.” Again, he struggled to control his expression, although this time it was anger that lurked in the shadows of his eye. “If that is where you wish to go, Evanora, then I shall be happy to accompany you.”

“If you’d rather not, Your Grace—”

“It’s as though you were sent specifically to torment me,” he snapped, but there was no heat in his voice. Instead, reluctant amusement tugged at his mouth. “If that’s where you wish to go, Duchess, then so be it.”

Evanora bit her lip and looked down at her plate to stop herself from breaking into laughter. She didn’t know how to flirt, but this was just as good.

And there was the added advantage of taking him somewhere that might prompt another confession.

Evanora didn’t know precisely where her desire to learn about the Duke’s past came from. All she knew was that among a tangled past full of heartbreak and, she fancied, neglect, there was the husk of a boy that sought love. He’d desired his father’s love, and failing that, had turned his love into anger and contempt.

If she could but understand how it came about, she might understand how best to reach him.

Magnus, it transpired, was an excellent rider, and Evanora was able to let her mare take her head a little.

“Can you believe this is the first time we’ve ridden together?” she asked, glancing across at him. “I’ve been here almost two months. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“I rarely ride,” he said abruptly.

“Why?”

“My mother was an avid rider; as a child I used to accompany her. The folly, as it happens, was a favorite place of hers.”

“And,” she said, her voice quiet, “I presume not a favorite place of yours?”

“She was a woman of few faults, but she was unable to see my father’s weakness of character, and she remained his steadfast supporter to the last.”

“I’m sorry.”

Awareness flooded back into his face. “There’s no reason for you to apologize. Really, it’s I who should be apologizing.”

“I wish I could have known her.”

“She was an excellent mother.” That blue eye, sky blue in the warmth of the sun, turned to her. “I’m certain she’d have liked you.”

The approbation made an involuntary smile cross her face. Magnus continued to look at her, absently guiding his horse with practiced hands. She’d never been able to view those hands the same after everything they’d done to her.

“Tell me about her,” she prompted. “I’ve never asked, but I presume the large painting in the drawing room is of her.”

“That’s correct.”

“You look very much like her.”

Again, he turned to her as though he was seeing her for the first time. “You consider there to be a likeness between us?”

“Your father occupies the space in the gallery, beside another painting of your mother. You have your father’s jaw, but your mother’s eyes.” And, she didn’t add, a certain look of sweetness when he thought no one was looking. That, she was convinced, hadn’t come from his father—although she suspected his stubbornness had.

“Few people have been able to see past the scar,” he murmured. “Both my parents lacking such disfigurement, I wouldn’t have said there was any similarities anymore.”

“Your scar is only your most prominent feature to you, Your Grace.” She dug her heels into her horse’s side, urging her into a canter. The folly was visible through the trees, appearing more as a fairy castle than a foolish man’s frivolity.

As they passed under emerald leaves and overhanging branches, Evanora couldn’t help but gasp at the miniature Norwood Castle that lay before them. There could only be a few rooms, and neglect combined with time had crumbled the stone, but it was—

“Magical,” she said, dismounting and approaching with a hand over her mouth. “I can see why your mother loved it here.”

He remained at a distance, mouth pursed in a frown. “You can only imagine the expense.”

“And the joy being here brought her.” She ducked under the arching doorway that led into the folly. If there’d been a door, it had long gone, and animals had made this their home over time. Sticks from nesting birds littered the floor, and paths had been trodden through the dead leaves that had blown in through the gaping windows.

Magnus followed, his head nearly grazing the ceiling. “She especially enjoyed the view from the top. Would you like to see?”

Taking his outstretched hand, they clambered the rickety stairs to reach the top of the tower. A seat had been fashioned from the walls, carved into the stone, and Evanora could imagine the calm-faced, beautiful woman that was his mother sitting here.

“Listen to the birds,” she said, lifting a hand and spinning. “Magnus, how can you not love it as your mother did?”

“It was riding here that she had the accident,” he said quietly. She stopped, skirts swinging around her, as she stared at him in horror. “No one knows precisely what happened as she refused to take a groom with her when she went riding. I was sixteen.”

“Oh—Magnus, I had no idea.”

“I’ve never taken anyone here before.”

“I’m so sorry.” She swallowed, grief from her own mother’s death bringing tears to her eyes. “I shouldn’t have insisted we come. I’m so sorry.”

“No, don’t apologize. It’s good to come back.”

“I remember how I felt when my mother died. I couldn’t even—for a long time I didn’t touch tea, because we’d always experimented together.”

“You’re a tea drinker?”

“Well, I am now. I’ve started to get back into it. Did you know, the lavender bush in the formal gardens makes fantastic tea? My mother introduced me to it—she had a book, you see, illustrating many different kinds of tea it’s possible to make with all sorts of herbs and leaves—and I have a mind to try and make it.” She smiled, letting the soft edges of sorrow touch her mouth. Being vulnerable before Magnus, who never treated her with scorn, came easily. “I think it’s time to embrace the things they loved.”

He looked out across the woodland. “Yes. I think it is.”

Chapter Nine

“A package for you, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Nancy.”

The maid bobbed a curtsy, and Evanora examined the package with some surprise. She hadn't been expecting a package, and her first instinct was to ring and see if it could have been addressed to her by mistake. If Magnus was expecting a delivery, that would explain it.

But no, the name written in carefully familiar handwriting was clearly hers. There could be no mistake; *Duchess* had been written clearly.

This was for her.

Alone in her dressing room, Evanora pulled at the string and opened the package to discover an assortment of roots and leaves. A folded letter, upon opening, contained instructions on how to make tea using them. She smiled, the expression lighting her face. They had to be from Magnus; after their conversation the previous day, this was the perfect present. It wasn't lavender, but that had been an indifferent success.

I think it's time to embrace the things they loved.

Indeed it was, and he was helping her embrace it in the perfect way.

Gathering the package and its contents, she made her way to the kitchens. Once, the expanse of them, bustling with scullery maids and often at least one footman, had intimidated her, but now she was more than accustomed to the busyness, and they were accustomed to her dropping in unannounced.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Mrs. White said, casting a darkling look at a kitchen maid scrubbing a potato. The unfortunate girl blushed. “What brings you to the kitchen?”

“I have some tea I wish to make,” she said, holding up the package. “Please, don’t mind me. I can make it myself.”

Mrs. White made no demure as Evanora settled herself beside the kettle and followed the instructions. As a child, Evanora had befriended the cook at the country estate, and had learned how to do several useful things. One of these involved boiling a kettle, something she’d wrongly assumed would be easy. Now, however, a towel in her hand to protect her from the heat of the handle, she was more than adept.

“Who’s that from, Your Grace?” Mrs. White asked. “If you don’t mind me saying, it looks suspect. Roots in tea? Dear me, I wouldn’t have said so.”

Evanora smiled fondly at the stout cook. “His Grace sent it to me. Tea can be made from all sorts of things, you know. It’s quite the thing.”

“If you say so, Your Grace,” Mrs. White said doubtfully.

“I’m quite certain. I’m sorry for taking so much of your time. Thank you.” Tea in one hand, the remnants of the package in the other, Evanora made her way back up to the drawing room, where she settled herself down with the tea and a book.



Johanna Wallace, having dressed Evanora and left her to go about her day, proceeded to go about hers. Thankfully, there was no gardening involved this time, and so she set herself the task of darning Evanora’s favorite dress, which had caught on a nail. One of the footman had set about removing the offending nail, and Johanna had the job of repairing the tear.

Mrs. White having left the kitchen for a moment, Nancy took the opportunity to lean over to Oliver Hopps, a footman she was sweet on. “He’s in love with her, that’s what,” she said with a significant look at the ceiling to where she supposed the Duke to be. “He just doesn’t know it yet.”

Oliver, a red-cheeked boy with more enthusiasm than sense, wrinkled his nose. "Who?"

"The Duke, of course."

Johanna looked up. It was common for downstairs staff to discuss the lives of their masters, but she would have no one speak ill of Evanora.

Although if they knew something about the Duke she didn't, it might be useful information. Therefore, instead of rebuking them as she otherwise might have done, she ostensibly turned back to her sewing and listened in to the conversation.

"In love with Her Grace?" Oliver said. "What makes you think that?"

"Only the fact he gives her a moon eye every time she ain't looking."

"When did you see him give her a moon eye?"

"Sometimes I'm late cleaning out the fireplaces," she mumbled, tucking flyaway red hair behind her ear. "I know what I see."

"I don't believe it. What makes you think he's in love with her?"

"Because," Penny interjected, leaning forward from where she was prepping dinner, "every time he spends time with her, he spends the next few days avoiding her."

Oliver wrinkled his brow. "What does that prove?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Nancy sighed. "He wouldn't feel the need to avoid her if he wasn't in love and trying not to be."

It was, Johanna reflected, a dubious statement at best.

"It could mean one of two things." Penny counted on her fingers. "Either he hates her—in which case why spend any time with her at all, and why give her a moon eye?"

"I didn't see no moon eye," Oliver muttered.

"Or when he spends time with her, he realizes how fast he's falling,

and he backs away.”

“I really feel for Her Grace,” Nancy sighed. “I think she’s sweet on him.”

“That’s quite enough gossip,” Johanna snapped. “It’s disrespectful to speak about Her Grace or His Grace, like that.”

Nancy glared at her mulishly, but Johanna’s position in the house, and the knowledge she had the ear of Her Grace, was enough to prevent her from saying any more. Oliver’s red face flamed even more.

“Quick!” Mrs. White said in panicked accents. “James, Oliver, where are you? We need a physician immediately.”

“A physician?” Johanna dropped her needlework and hurried out to the corridor. “Why do we need a physician?”

“It’s Her Grace.” Mrs. White placed a hand on her copious bosom as she panted. A white-faced girl, presumably the messenger and source of the panic, bit her lip nervously. “Mary just told me Mrs. Clement found Her Grace collapsed in the drawing room. Oliver, there you are—you need to call on the physician and *bring him here immediately.*”

“Yes, Mrs. White.”

Johanna pushed her way through the crowd, her pulse thundering in her head. “I must go to her,” she said blindly, feeling her way through the panicked crowd. “She’ll need me. Send for His Grace.”

“You heard Miss Wallace,” Mrs. White commanded. “James, fetch His Grace.”

“Where is he?”

“At the brewery.”

Johanna left the commotion behind her as she sprinted up the servants’ staircase into the main hall, where the Mrs. Clement and Brisket struggled with Evanora’s inert form.

“Oh, Your Grace.” Johanna swallowed her panic and forced her

unruly wits into action. Evanora's face was exceedingly pale—even her lips were white—and every breath was shallow.

"She coughed up blood," Mrs. Clement said as they reached the landing. "When I found her, her book was splattered with it and she was convulsing on the floor."

Johanna opened Evanora's bedchamber door and supported her Lady's head as they carried her in and put her on the bed. There, Evanora lay still, breath rasping through her throat.

"James has gone for His Grace," Johanna said, taking Evanora's hand and stroking the damp skin. "Oliver is fetching the physician. What should we do?"

Mrs. Clement twisted rheumy hands in her apron. "Loosen her dress. She needs to be allowed to breathe."

Brisket left the room, presumably to await his master's arrival, as the two women removed Evanora's dress. It drew a strange parallel to the first time Evanora had been sick, although that time it had been the Duke undressing her—and Johanna had almost found herself wishing she hadn't interrupted them. The look in his eye when he'd turned to her had been enough to make any modest woman blush.

It was convenient, then, Johanna was not wholly virtuous, and she'd known precisely what that look in the Duke's eye had meant. She'd been thrilled that the Duke was showing such signs of falling for Evanora while exhibiting such tenderness. He was not the cruel man she'd supposed him to be.

She couldn't focus on those joys now. Not when Evanora's frame shuddered under her in another fit.

"Just you wait for the physician," Johanna said, barely hearing herself speak. It wasn't the words that were important, it was the soothing nature of them. Mrs. Clement bustled away, murmuring about how the poor girl needed water. "You'll be all right, see? The physician will know best and all will be well. Hold on." She pressed Evanora's hand to her lips. "Hold on, my friend."



Magnus strode through the hallway of his Castle, a panting James behind him. Brisket, his usually austere expression exchanged for one of concern, met him at the base of the stairs.

“The physician is with her, Your Grace,” Brisket said as Magnus leaped up the stairs two at a time. “We removed her to her bedchamber as we thought she would be more comfortable.”

There was a veritable crowd in his wife’s bedchamber. Mrs. Clement stood by the door, keys in one hand and the other fumbling with the cross around her neck. Wallace, Evanora’s lady’s maid, stood resolutely by the bed, one of Evanora’s pale hands in her own, and a footman attended the physician.

Simon Jones had been his father’s physician before his, but although a shock of hair combed back was gray, Jones had the vigor of a man twenty years his junior.

“Evanora.” Her name burst from his lips as he pushed his way past Wallace to be at her bedside. Deathly pale, only the faintest of breaths escaping her lips, she looked rather more like a corpse than a bride. “What’s wrong with her? What happened?”

“The worst has past,” Jones reassured him, latching his doctor’s bag with a sharp *snap* that made Mrs. Clement jump. “Your wife was extremely lucky she didn’t ingest more of the tea, or we’d be in a dire position.”

He looked around wildly. “Tea? What tea?”

“A package came for her, Your Grace,” Wallace said. “She thought it was from you.”

“Me? Why would I send her tea?”

“I would advise,” Jones said gently, “not to be too agitated around Her Grace until she recovers fully.”

“Yes, of course.” Magnus took her hand in his and pressed it to his lips. He’d spent the past few weeks doing his best to avoid her, and finding himself orbiting her like the sun. Although he didn’t make any advances past accepting those she presented to him, although it had been an aching exercise in restraint, he’d thought he’d managed with

relative success.

Until, that was, James came to him with the news that she was deathly ill and he must come at once.

Then, only then, had he known how much he cared for her. She was indeed his sun; without her, like the garden, he would wither and die. Life had been bereft of joy and direction before she had burst into his orbit, and now—now, he knew not how he could live without her.

“What can I do?” he asked, his voice low. “How can I help?”

“I will give your cook directions to make up a tonic. I advise she takes some every two hours. In a few hours, hopefully, she will awaken, but the first night is the most telling.”

Magnus nodded distractedly. “I’ll stay with her.”

“Recovery will be slow,” the physician warned. “If there is a change in her condition, fetch me. Otherwise, I will visit again tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you, Jones.”

With a smile, Jones left the room, and it slowly emptied of bodies until he was alone with Evanora. His Evanora. His wife.

“You must be strong,” he whispered, brushing back a lock of brown hair. He loved her hair, loved its vibrancy and the way it gleamed red in the sunlight. He loved the way it curled around her face.

Most of all, he loved the way she looked at him, with a mischievous gleam in her hazel-green eyes.

Now, though, he knew if she opened them, they’d be like aged oak, just like when he’d first seen her in that chapel and they’d been dark with scorn and misery. Even after she’d arrived, after she’d started working on the house, brown had stubbornly persisted in moments she’d thought he couldn’t see. Moments of sadness. Of loneliness.

But when she looked at him with mischief, or when she’d looked at him heavy with sexual satisfaction that time in the summerhouse,

green glowed in her irises like new shoots in the sun. It bewitched him utterly and completely.

“Please, My Love.” He kissed her knuckles again, letting his lips linger on her soft skin. “Please. Stay with me.”

When after several hours there’d been no change, bad or good, Magnus summoned Wallace to take his place by her side—knowing as he did Wallace’s loyalty, he trusted her to take good care of his wife—and went in search of this mysterious tea Evanora had thought he’d sent.

“I thought you’d want to look at it, Your Grace,” Brisket said as he led Magnus into the library. “I had it placed on your desk just here, as you can see.”

“Thank you, Brisket.”

His butler bowed and left, closing the door with a soft click behind him. Alone once again, Magnus approached the desk with trepidation. Herbs and roots were gathered in individual bags, a note detailing precisely how to combine them to make tea.

Magnus cleared his desk and emptied the bags one at a time. He was by no means an expert in this field, but these were evidently not tea-making ingredients. In fact, he was relatively sure a ground substance was belladonna, though the note insisted it was a rare root from the East.

The note itself had been written on fine writing paper, though there was no evidence of make or manufacture. A fine ink pen had scratched out the instructions in handwriting that, he suspected, was designed to emulate his.

No wonder Evanora had suspected it to have come from him; they’d discussed her love of tea several times over the past few weeks, and she’d even attempted to make lavender tea using lavender from their gardens a few weeks ago. For someone to have sent her this, therefore, implied someone knew her well—and had wanted her dead.

Chapter Ten

Dawn light slanted in through a gap in the curtains. Evanora

stared at the ceiling for a moment, puzzling over the geometric shapes the light cast. Fuzzy as her mind was, it took her a moment to understand what she was seeing: the ceiling of her bedchamber.

With effort, her limbs absurdly heavy, she turned her head to encounter a man slumbering on the chair beside her bed. His hand lay loosely on the covers close to hers. A patch covered one eye and the beginning of a scar she knew as well as her own face. His one visible eye was closed, veins streaking across the eyelid, and the harsh lines of his face was relaxed with sleep.

A sharp pain stabbed her stomach, and she groaned. Nausea, as encompassing as her weakness, swamped her.

Magnus' eye opened, and he possessed himself of her hand once again. "Evanora?" he asked. "Evanora, My Love, can you hear me?"

"What happened?" The words were hardly more than a whisper, but before he could answer, she retched. With ease born of practice, he fetched a small bowl from beside the bed and held it under her mouth, one hand supporting her head. Bitter acid flooded her mouth and she spat.

"You've taken ill, My Dear," Magnus said with forced calmness. "You drank poison disguised as tea, but you're all right now."

Evanora didn't feel all right. Rather, she felt as though the contents of her stomach were doing their level best to expel themselves along with a few vital organs.

"I thought the tea was from you," she said.

Even in the darkness, she felt rage rolling from him. "If I ever want to give you a gift," he said, each word clipped, "I'll give it to you myself."

"I'm sorry, Magnus."

"Don't be sorry." He took both hands and pressed them, one at a time, against her lips. "Never be sorry. You did nothing wrong."

"If I hadn't blindly made the tea—"

"Shh. Your only crime was trust, which is an admirable quality."

"Only, I fancy, when it doesn't put us in danger," she said wryly. "Have you been with me all night?"

"Your lady's maid, Wallace, insisted on taking a watch."

"Of course she did. We were childhood friends, you know."

"So she informed me as she hustled me from your side and took up station beside you. I believe she thought caring for you to be her duty."

"She did when I had the measles," Evanora recalled. "I got them late, at seventeen. She sat by my bed day and night bathing my head and offering me what comfort she could."

"A loyal servant is valuable indeed."

Evanora smiled tiredly. "She's more than a servant, Magnus. She's a friend."

"So I can see." Magnus looked at her with appeared to be unaccountable fondness in the dim light. "Wallace also informed me, in no uncertain terms, that you should be allowed to see your family and visit town. There's a park in particular—Hyde Park, I believe—that was your favorite. Would you like me to take you there?"

Evanora blinked, the enormity of what he was offering not lost on her.

“You’re offering to take me back to London?”

“If you should wish it.”

“I wouldn’t want to inconvenience—”

“Do you wish it?” he interrupted. “I want no more talk of me. Would *you* like to visit town again?”

Exhaustion threatened to swirl her away on a river of darkness, but she managed to squeeze his hand. “I should like that very much, Magnus.”

“Then it shall be, as soon as you’re fit to travel.” He bent down and kissed her cheek. It was the lightest of brushes—a feather drifting in the wind—but the tenderness of the caress followed her into her dreams.



“My Dear, can you hear me?”

Under Magnus’ watchful gaze, Evanora stirred fretfully, tossing her head. Sweat coated her face, and although Jones had merely informed him this was the body’s method of releasing toxins, Magnus was worried. Fever never boded well, and he feared if she slept too long, she wouldn’t awaken. After the first few hours of lucidity, she’d regressed into distracted incoherency and then fallen into a sleep from which nothing could wake her.

“Evanora?” he pressed, leaning over her face. Breath fanned over her face and her eyes flew open. The suddenness of the action sent him reeling back, though there was no recognition in her gaze.

“Who are you?”

“Evanora, My Dear, I’m your husband. Magnus.”

She settled back against the pillows, a frown creasing her forehead. “My husband? I don’t have a husband.”

“We married three months ago. Surely you remember.” Although, he

had to confess, the entire event had been unmemorable. She'd been derisive, regretful, and he'd been dismissive; even her beauty hadn't swayed him into thinking her anything but a reluctant companion, whose dowry was necessary toward repairing and restoring his Estate.

"My Love, you're safe here," he said as she looked at him again, fear resting in the depths of her eyes. She'd never looked at him with fear before. "You're safe."

"Where's my mother?"

"Evanora, your—" He hesitated. She was clearly delirious; to upset her further would likely only harm her. "I'll send Johanna Wallace to you. Remember her?"

"Johanna?" The frown deepened, cutting lines into her skin that he longed to smooth away. "Yes, send Johanna to me. She will tell me what's going on."

Though it pained him to leave her, he forced himself out of the chamber and rang the bell. Wallace came at once, the same dark circles around her eyes as he suspected were around his.

"It's getting worse," he said. Over the past few days, he'd found himself confiding in her more than he ought. Speaking with someone who knew Evanora as she did brought him comfort, and she had a sensible head on her shoulders. "She doesn't recognize me and she asked for her mother."

Wallace's eyes widened slightly. "Her mother?"

"I said I would bring you to her."

"There's no need to distress her," Wallace said with her customary composure. "I'll see to her now. I recommend you eat something, Your Grace."

"Yes. Yes, of course. I'll have something sent to the library."

Wallace curtsied, and he ambled downstairs, rubbing his face. Jones had assured him this would pass, but having her not recognize him—having her look at him in fear and revulsion—was more than he could

bear. If she could not recognize him, his place was not by her side. He could do nothing here but worry himself over her. Generally, Magnus did not consider himself a worrying man. Indeed, he largely prided himself on his unshakeable nature; even his father's death, and the knowledge of the debts he would have to pay, merely settled like a heavy weight in his gut. He neither paced the floor, nor drank copious amounts of brandy. In short, he had handled it as he handled everything: with detached determination.

Evanora, however, was an entirely different matter. If he could not comfort her, he would turn his mind to something else.

The herbs and roots still lay on his desk, along with handwritten notes of all his observations from the evening. He'd made them in the early hours of that first night, when the flame of fury was so strong it could have burned the entire Castle down.

Now, as time and concern had muted it, it was merely banked rage, simmering for when he had a moment to address it. First, he'd intended to assure himself of Evanora's recovery—but if that was not possible—he sat at his desk and dashed a quick note in a hand that barely resembled his; his usually elegant letters were rendered smudged and uneven by haste.

Dear Robert Blackmoor,

I write with urgency to inform you I suspect my wife to have been the subject of an attack on her life. If you are amenable, I intend to call tomorrow in the hopes you can shed some light on who may have done this.

Yours,

The Duke of Norwood



Peter strolled around Covent Garden, a mask across his eyes and nose, although his mouth remained free. Beside him, Charles Rathbone paced anxious.

"You are good friends with the Duke of Norwood, are you not?" Charles demanded. Although they'd been friends for several weeks,

this was the first time Charles had brought an issue of this nature to him. “My father tells me you visited the Castle, in fact.”

“I did.”

“Evanora wrote to him a few weeks ago to inform him of the fact—as though we should be pleased that you are allowed to visit when we are not.”

Peter frowned. “Are you not allowed to visit?”

“Well, there has been no mention of one, and Norwood bundled her away fast enough once they were married that there was barely time for a farewell, never mind—” Charles cursed and took another drink from the masked delight standing close. Peter let his gaze trail across her round breasts, bulging from the tight cut of her dress, and her tiny waist. “But you visited them?”

“I have, yes.”

“And?” Charles gestured, his movements clumsy. Peter suspected if he’d been drinking less, his mouth would have been a little less loose. “Do you think the rumors are true?”

“What rumors?”

“Oh, you know the ones.” Another wild gesture. “That he’s abusing her.”

Peter considered for a moment. He’d heard whispers, but no one had come to him about any rumors, and as such the contents of the whispers had been concealed from him—likely because he was known to associate with Magnus. Luckily, the connection hadn’t yet proved to reflect badly on him, although if this were the style of talk that was circulating, that might change.

“Where did you hear such rumors?” he asked.

Charles stared at him, his eyes dark behind his mask. “Perhaps I ought not to have told you.”

“No—fear not, I won’t inform Norwood of your thoughts. I merely

wondered—no one has approached me, you see, so I merely wondered from whence they originated.”

“I can’t be sure. There’ve been rumors about Norwood’s wild behavior for years—and his temper. Everyone knows about his temper.”

Peter nodded slowly. “I suppose when you’ve come back from the war, you change a little.”

“Did you see any evidence of him being unkind?”

“I should hardly expect Norwood to show it while I was there, Rathbone,” Peter said, clapping his friend on the back. “Come now, let’s have no more of this melancholy.”

“Was she happy?”

Here, Peter hesitated. The truth was that Evanora didn’t look precisely *unhappy*, although how accurate the term ‘happy’ would be wasn’t certain. “She appeared to have her own pleasures,” he said at last. “Playing the pianoforte, walking, things like that. I shouldn’t have thought she was unhappy.”

“And her husband?”

“From what I could tell, they saw each other rarely except at mealtimes.”

“She never avoids anyone she’s not scared of,” Charles muttered. “Lore was the only other one she avoided—though he sought her out.”

Lore. Though Charles appeared not to have worked it out, it seemed almost certain that Lore was behind these rumors—he was the only one to have any sort of motive, though if the rumors were already widespread through society, perhaps it wasn’t surprising Charles hadn’t made a definitive judgment.

“Norwood can be a man of temper, yes, but there’s nothing that has so far indicated he has taken out his frustrations on a woman,” he said.

“Has he been married before?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Then you can’t know anything. I appreciate your attempts to reassure me, Holland, but it doesn’t reassure me. It can’t. The only thing that would reassure me is speaking to Evanora herself.”

“Calm yourself, Rathbone. There’s no use in you working yourself up and traveling all the way to Norwood Castle. What if he doesn’t let you in?”

Charles lurched back. “Do you think he wouldn’t let me in?”

“I think he would give you a talking to for being so carried away. Better to think about it logically.”

The other boy, so much younger in a worldly sense than Peter, despite the closeness in age, wrinkled his nose as he tried to think. “What should I do?”

“For now, nothing. He can’t keep her there forever. Try to stay out of it, that’s my advice. As for me.” Peter gave a tight smile. “I’d better do something about these rumors.



Aching light.

Evanora’s world was confined to aching, stabbing light that pierced her eyelids even when the blinds were closed. A cool hand encased hers, and a wet cloth dripped tears into her hair, but still her skin burned cold. Shivers racked her body.

“Mama,” she whispered, reaching out to what she knew was a figment of her imagination; her mother had never looked so serene, so beautiful, so encased in light, as the figure now before her. Still, with a yearning she’d forgotten, she stretched her fingers toward it.

“Don’t you go worrying about your mother, Dear,” Johanna said, taking the hand and putting it back against the covers. Her awful, restraining covers. “It’ll be all right soon. You’ll see.”

Tears of her own mingled with the water. “I miss her.”

"I know you do. I miss her too—she was a mother to the both of us."

"Where am I, Jo? What is this place? And why is it so bright?"

"You're in your bedchamber, Evanora."

"My chamber doesn't look like this." Her chamber was delicate and elegant, with white furnishings and a view overlooking the street. This room, from what she'd gathered through slitted eyelids, was heavily furnished with mahogany fittings. Old-fashioned. Unfamiliar. "Jo, where am I?"

"You're in Norwood Castle."

Norwood Castle. That didn't sound familiar at all. And her head ached so.

"Take me home," she begged, her face crumpling, though she didn't have the strength to do more than cry like a newborn kitten. "Please, Johanna, take me home."

Her oldest friend squeezed her hand. "Soon, Dear. You'll return home soon."



Sir Robert Blackmoor, knighted for his service to the Crown, lived in inauspicious lodgings on Half Moon Street—fashionable enough, but not in anyone's way. Considering the work he'd done for the Crown, Magnus wasn't surprised he lived a quiet life.

To avoid gossip, or the potential of such, he'd hired a carriage to take him to the address, and he alighted now with the intention of being next to invisible. He was rarely enough in society, that a visit to a retired spy might be another cause for gossip he couldn't afford.

A butler, younger than Magnus had expected, greeted him politely. No sign of horror or disgust penetrated his expression of polite expectancy, though that didn't surprise Magnus; who knew how many relics from the war Blackmoor had welcomed into his home. Blackmoor and his society was one of the few he enjoyed without fear of revulsion. "I'm here for Sir Blackmoor," Magnus said. "Tell him the

Duke of Norwood is here to see him.”

“Very good, Your Grace.” The butler led him through to the parlor, and Magnus took a seat as he waited.

“Norwood!” Blackmoor, a slight man with a handsome face that slipped from memory like water from a duck’s back, held out his hand with warmth. “It’s a pleasure to see you again, old friend.”

“Blackmoor,” Magnus said, returning his friend’s handshake. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“I have in one respect. Please, allow me to introduce my wife, Lady Abigail Blackmoor.”

Magnus swallowed his surprise as a pretty woman, with auburn hair framing a freckled face, curtsied shyly. Blackmoor was thirty-five if a day; his wife barely looked out of the schoolroom, though the glance she sent him revealed quiet adoration.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lady Blackmoor.”

“And you, Your Grace,” she murmured.

Blackmoor chuckled. “Very good. Now, Norwood, let’s go to the library, shall we, and we can talk this through.”

Magnus bowed to Lady Blackmoor, whose gaze lingered on his scar and eyepatch with the level of trepidation he’d once expected from Evanora, and followed Blackmoor into the library.

“Now,” Blackmoor said, closing the door, “we won’t be disturbed.”

“May I congratulate you on your marriage.”

“Yes, she’s a fine thing, isn’t she? Thought it was about time to settle down. I retired, you know. Spy work is all very well and good, but I’ve past my prime.”

“Your wife doesn’t appear to think so.”

“Oh, Abby’s a babe yet. She’ll have time enough to think me the

devil.” He laughed comfortably. “Now, to business. I was sorry indeed to hear of your distressing news.”

“I have an idea who might have done it, but I can’t prove anything.” Magnus placed the package of herbs and roots on the table between them. “I believe Evanora’s love of tea is fairly widely known, but as you can see, they attempted to emulate my handwriting. Not an expert attempt, but it was enough to fool someone who didn’t expect anything else.”

Blackmoor shot him a glance. “Your wife is, of course, Lady Evanora?”

“Correct.”

“I hear she made quite the scandal during her debut.”

“Rather, Lord Lore embroiled her in his scandal.” Magnus’ tone was tight, and every line of his body was tense. Lord Lore and he had yet to meet, but he was welcoming the day they did, and not so they could establish a friendship. “It’s my belief Lord Lore was behind this attack on her life—from what I can tell, he’s angry she made a good match despite his efforts to ensure the contrary.”

“I see.” Blackmoor looked at the package, examining its contents with a practiced eye. “I don’t spend much time in society, although perhaps I ought to start now I’ve got a bride to entertain, but I can say with certainty Lord Lore, rather than attempting to sabotage her, is expressing his concern about her happiness.”

“Concern? As though he has any right to do so,” Magnus said viciously. “He’s trying to blacken my name, and I won’t have it.”

“Quite right, old boy. Nevertheless, I won’t count my chickens until they’ve hatched. Tell me, when did this arrive, and how?”

“It arrived with the daily post and was taken straight to my wife. I was absent, at the brewery, or perhaps I’d have stopped this nonsense.”

“You have no reason to suppose it was given by one of the staff?”

“Good God, no. They adore her.”

“Merely trying to eliminate possibilities,” Blackmoor said with a bland smile. That was always how he worked; behind his obscurity was a mind that worked twice as fast as anyone else’s. “I’ll have all this identified and then we’ll know what we’re working with. Are you planning on returning to town in the near future?”

“When Evanora’s well enough, I’ve promised her to return to town to see her family, and for a change of scenery.”

“In the meantime, why not come out for a game of cards tonight? Downplay your wife’s illness. Lord Lore’s often at White’s these days—I’ll wager we’ll encounter him tonight. I know you don’t enter society much, but if you assure him of your marital happiness and your wife’s health, we can see what he has to say about it.”

Magnus pushed down any reservations he had about attending a society event, especially when his thoughts were consumed with Evanora. This was a vital piece of reconnaissance, and he would not shy away from it. “And from that, we’ll know how to proceed.”

Blackmoor smiled. “Precisely.”

Chapter Eleven

Magnus dressed with special care that evening, tying his cravat in the Ballroom style and discarding several mangled attempts before he was satisfied. Rogers, his valet, stood patiently by until finally Magnus viewed himself with grim satisfaction. “Lore will regret interfering with me tonight.”

“Very good, Your Grace. Would you prefer the white eyepatch or your usual black?”

Magnus considered the two his valet offered him, his mind somewhat taken from his sails. “Which would you recommend?”

Rogers smiled. Magnus knew that when he’d taken the position of valet, it was with the understanding he would be responsible for Magnus’ style and appearance; a role he had maintained admirably. “Might I recommend the white, Your Grace, so to match your cravat.”

He considered. The white, he fancied, drew more attention to his face and scar. Three months ago, he would never have considered white, but he found he minded his scar less since Evanora had caressed it so lovingly. She had a way of making him see things differently, as though the world took on another meaning through her eyes.

“The white it is,” he said.

“Excellent choice, Your Grace.”

Magnus shot his valet a look, but the man remained perfectly impassive as Magnus fixed the eyepatch on his face. “How do I look?”

“Exceptional, if I do say so, Your Grace.”

“I wish you would stop speaking as though there was a stick up your
—”

“My apologies, Your Grace.”

Magnus adjusted his cravat and glowered at Rogers, who merely brushed a fleck of invisible dirt from the coat he held in his hands. Though he wouldn't have admitted it, the exchange had partially soothed his nerves, which ran rampant. Confronting Lore might be a worthy goal, but he would have preferred to do it on a battlefield than in a club, where the rules of battle were very different.

“You're lucky I'm too occupied to give your insolence much thought.”

For the first time, Rogers allowed himself a thin smile as he helped Magnus into the coat and brushed across the shoulders. “I believe I am, Your Grace.”

Satisfied with his appearance, Magnus descended to find Blackmoor, exquisitely dressed in a navy waistcoat and fawn breeches, waiting in the library with madeira on the table before him. “Come, Norwood, have a bottle with me before we depart.”

It was already eleven, but Magnus made no objection. Lore would be at the gaming hells for a good deal longer yet, and the more he'd imbibed, the more he would reveal.

“So,” Blackmoor said, pouring a generous glass of madeira, “you're attached to your wife, I take it?”

Magnus raised an eyebrow. “Ought I not to be?”

“We all know the situation about your marriage, my boy. It wasn't a love match, that's for certain.”

“Perhaps not, Blackmoor, but she remains my wife.”

“There are rumors going around that you—” Blackmoor paused delicately. His experience on the continent spying for His Majesty had given him unparalleled social ease, Magnus knew, but he looked almost uncomfortable. “That Evanora may not be safe in your care.”

“Who would say that?”

“Having been absent from society for so long, and with your—” He waved at Magnus’ scar. “Well, Duke or no, it’s easy for the ton to agree—no, to positively glory in the assassination of your character.”

“I’m much obliged for the warning.”

“Making an appearance in society tonight will not be easy, Norwood, but the sooner you show the ton your charming side—don’t look at me like that—the sooner they’ll put these rumors to rest about Evanora’s happiness.”

“If I thought she was unhappy—”

“Yes,” Blackmoor soothed, “I’m quite aware you would attempt to rectify the situation. You can be assured I’ve done my best to counter any talk coming my way, but the fact is I’ve been somewhat absent myself.”

“We’re coming to town as soon as she’s recovered enough.” Magnus didn’t voice the thought that she may not soon be recovered enough—or perhaps even recovered at all. Doing something positive to help the situation and bring her justice was more profitable than hovering around her bedside as she cried out for her mother, no matter how difficult the distance may be. “Perhaps then, they’ll see the truth about our position for themselves.”

“Be sure to visit Almack’s.”

Magnus hated Almack’s. He despised the false dignity the patronesses assumed, and their habit of withholding entrance to those they deemed inferior or unsuitable. Despite the latest rumors, about which he’d heard nothing from Peter, he was relatively assured his title would pave the way to admittance, but the thought brought little joy. “Must I?”

“I believe Lady Cowper may have sympathy to your position, and will be the least likely to treat you to a lecture on appropriate behavior.”

Of all the patronesses, Lady Cowper was perhaps the most sympathetic, and certainly the most popular for a reason. Unlike Lady Jersey’s ostentatious show of virtue, Lady Cowper was known to have

a wicked sense of fun. Magnus had only met her once, but he'd been pleasantly surprised by her grace, and the way she'd looked him unflinchingly in the eye.

Just as Evanora did.

"It seems I have my work cut out," he said tightly, saluted Blackmoor with his glass. "Shall we get to it?"

They found Lord Lore at the faro table, close enough to Evanora's brother, Charles, that he could conceivably be listening to the conversation, but at enough distance to be entirely separate. Magnus, playing by Lore's rules, approached Charles and bowed.

"I hope luck favors you tonight, Rathbone."

Bemused, Charles looked up at him and blinked. His expression cleared as he recognized his brother-in-law, and he gave a curt nod. "Norwood. Does my sister fare well?"

Magnus' attention was so focused on Lore he knew the precise moment the man noticed him; he froze, long fingers splayed across the table, and his dark gaze focused utterly on Magnus' face. "Yes," he said absently, "She's quite well. You can be assured of it."

Charles' gaze traveled across his face, taking in the scar and eyepatch, and Magnus was suddenly reminded this was the first time they'd met man-to-man. Now was too late for regrets, however, and so he inclined his head and took his place at a hazard table. Blackmoor, watching events unfold from afar, was ostensibly invested in faro and paying them no attention, though Magnus knew every sense was honed in on them.

It wasn't long before, Charles Rathbone forgotten, Lore joined Magnus' table. "Of all men I expected to see tonight, Norwood, you were not one of them," he said.

"Is that so?"

"I thought you were enjoying married bliss with your wife in the countryside."

Aware that considerable attention was being directed at them, Magnus merely smiled. "Married life is more charming than I'd anticipated, but a man must have his vices."

"Forgive me, Duke, but I didn't think your vices lay toward gaming."

"Where, then, did you think my vices lay?" His tone was quiet, but a thrum of danger ran in every syllable. If Lore wanted to test him, by God he would get what he wanted, and he'd regret his haste.

Lore gestured expansively. "Why, how could anyone know when you spend so much time outside of society?"

"How indeed," he murmured.

"How does the Duchess fare? Keeping in good health, I hope?"

Magnus looked up, but was unable to see anything in Lore's face, but boiling anger behind his smile. From the corner of his eye, he saw Blackmoor examining Lore's expression with equal focus. "She is in excellent health, as always," he said smoothly. "I hardly think I'd leave her side if she were ill."

"I know many indifferent husbands who have no compunction in leaving their wives no matter their state." Lore shrugged and turned to the game. "Perhaps I made a mistake in assuming indifference."

"Perhaps you did."

Another quick glance, dark eyes narrowed. "Has she changed you so much, Norwood, that you're inclined to enter society after so long shunning it? I cannot account for this change."

"It's convenient, then, you've no need to." Abruptly, Magnus rose. "I'm aware of your history with my wife, and the lies you've told at her expense, Lore. There's little doubt in my mind that you're behind every attempt to delegitimize and harm her, and I warn you to watch your step."

"My Dear Norwood." Lore laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. "You must be drunk."

He smiled tightly. "If I were drunk, Lore, you'd have suffered more than a warning. I bid you goodnight."

Blackmoor caught up to him as he left the building and strode down the road. "Norwood, My Dear fellow, where are you going?"

"I know he did it," Magnus seethed, "I just can't prove it."

"My request was for you to be charming, not utter veiled threats."

"I beg your pardon, Blackmoor—I consider my threat to have been both clear and elegantly stated."

"You lost your temper."

"Do I not have provocation?" Magnus whirled and became aware, in the heat of his rage, how much he towered over his friend; Blackmoor, though skilled in the art of sword fighting, boxing and shooting, was a slight man, and Magnus knew if he so wished, he could break Blackmoor's neck in a moment. The thought cooled him, and he stepped back. "Perhaps I was hasty, but thinking of Lore sitting in that club having made an attempt on my wife's life—"

"You know nothing of which you can be sure."

"Did you not see him?"

"There's no doubt he was behind these rumors, but spreading rumor is a different beast from attempted murder. You must see that. Calm yourself and consider your next course of action."

"I must return to my wife."

"After stating so openly she's well?"

"You know as well as I her health is not assured. Any investigations you do here must be done alone."

Blackmoor sighed and scratched his beard, which was now speckled with gray. "I'll do my best."



The dangling, crimson silk of her bed's hangings had become intimately familiar to Evanora. The fever had broken earlier that morning, and instead of this chamber with its heavy furnishings seeming alien, it now felt like home. She was, however, too weak to move, and so resigned herself to seeking patterns in the folds of material above her.

"I've brought Mrs. White's special broth," Johanna said, pushing through the door with a tray. "Can you sit?"

"Magnus?" Evanora asked, just as she'd asked when she'd first awoken. "Can you send him to me?"

"He'll be back any second," Johanna said, but Evanora noticed the way her gaze flitted across the bedsheets. "Now, are you hungry?"

In truth, Evanora's stomach was so sore she didn't want to eat anything at all, but at the anxious look on Johanna's face, she smiled. "Starving."

After dinner, of which she could only eat a little, she requested Johanna and Mrs. Clement take her downstairs to the garden. Although it was late afternoon, the air was still warm enough, and she longed for the feel of sunlight on her skin. Wherever Magnus was, she reasoned, she'd be able to see him coming better from the garden.

Though in the end James carried her out to the chair, something she felt was wholly unnecessary, she eventually found herself close enough to the remnants of honeysuckle that its scent wafted to her in the cooling breeze, and at a gap in the hedge through which she could see the avenue Magnus would approach from.

Bees buzzed around the flowers, birds sang in the trees, and her book slowly slipped from her fingers. Lulled by the gentle pleasure of the sunlight and the simple serenade around her, at first she didn't hear the clatter of the carriage. She did, however, hear the warmth of Magnus' voice as he said, "Evanora, My Love."

She started, the book slipped to the floor, and she held up her arms to him. Scarred and beautiful, he pressed his lips against both her fingers and kneeled before her. "I didn't know you were gone," she said on a half laugh, half sob. "Magnus, how could you leave me like that?"

"I could do nothing for you here." The tips of his fingers grazed her chin, sending tingles across her skin in their wake. "How do you feel? Are you much recovered?"

"I'm improving."

"I didn't think you'd be lucid before I returned, My Dear. I'm sorry."

Apologizing came so easy to him; of all the men she'd met, he had the least compunction about admitting his error, and offering an apology so genuine, so sweet, that it stole her breath.

"Was I... not much lucid?"

"Don't think of it."

She pulled his hand against her cheek and cradled it there. Finding Magnus had gone when she'd woken had been like a cruel dream; having him return, so contrite and tender, was balm to her bruised heart. "I missed you."

His eye widened. "Truly?"

"Can a woman not miss her husband, My Lord Duke?"

And there it was, a smile that broke across his face like a dawning sunrise. "I'm sorry I asked, Duchess. Come, let's go inside before you catch cold."

Evanora gasped as he scooped her up into his arms and carried her inside. James, upon carrying her out, had behaved unflattering as though she were heavy; Magnus, in contrast, appeared not to notice the weight of her frame.

"What did you do?" she asked as he carried her up the stairs. The temptation to press her nose against his cheek, to nuzzle and kiss the rugged lines of his face, grew stronger, and she wondered if she ought to give in to them. "When you were away? Did you visit town?"

"I did."

"For what purpose?"

"I had some business, My Love, which I shan't bore you with at present. Needless to say it was pressing, or I wouldn't have left you." With aching gentleness, he deposited her back on her bed and remained, one hand under her back and his face hovering over hers, for a moment. "I have prepared the way for our trip to town, however, if you still wish it."

"You have?"

"Lady Cowper even consented to give us Almack's vouchers for the upcoming season, should you wish to go."

Back in her first season, when Lord Lore had given her his attention and professed his inclination to marry, she'd been a regular at Almack's, and had danced the night away with as many young men as she'd wanted—though the first two dances were always with Lord Lore.

When he'd thrown her over, as ungracefully as possible, and spread the vicious rumors about her virtue and propriety, Lady Jersey had revoked her voucher. She hadn't attempted to purchase another since.

"Goodness, society will admit me again?" she asked, rather dryly. "I hadn't thought I'd see the day."

"You're a Duchess now, My Dear."

"A Duchess," she mused, looking up into the face of her husband, the Duke. Strange how a face that had repulsed her so utterly at their first meeting, had now become the face upon which her hopes and dreams were pinned. "I suppose I am. Should you wish to visit Almack's, Magnus?"

"I think it would be appropriate. Society can forgive us not visiting town over summer, but in the new season I'd doubt they'd be so forgiving."

That didn't seem right; Magnus had been avoiding society for so long it made no sense that he was concerning himself over what others thought of him or her. "Are you of a mind to care?" she asked.

"Are you so surprised?"

“That you would engage with society after so long rejecting it? Yes, Magnus, I’m surprised you would go to this trouble.”

“Let’s just say I have greater motivation.” Before she had a moment to protest—though what she might have said escaped her—he pressed her hand to his lips. “You look tired, My Dear.”

“I am, a little,” she confessed. “Will you stay with me awhile?”

“Of course.”

He didn’t kiss her this time; merely held her hand as exhaustion took her, and when she woke again in the middle of the night, still he was there. She smiled.

Chapter Twelve

Although the physician was pleased with Evanora's progress, recovery took significantly longer than she had patience for. Luckily, Magnus was pliant under her direction, and she frequently took him into the garden so he could work under her command, trimming back the roses and generally preparing the ground for winter's frost. Around her, the Estate turned every shade of orange and red, as fall's fire raged across the trees.

"When the brewery releases its first batch to the market," Magnus said, the breeze teasing brown hair across his forehead, "we'll have the means to hire a gardener or two."

"And spare me this delight?" Evanora teased.

"You delight in working your husband to the bone?"

"I delight in seeing my husband on his knees before me."

At her words, Magnus looked up. Soil coated his hands—for he refused to wear gloves—and his jacket was similarly stained, but no one could mistake or unsee the heat in his eye. Evanora craved that heat; whatever tenderness he showed her, and continued to show her, he had not yet so much as kissed her again. Perhaps this was due to her illness and weakness, but she was less ill and weak than she had been, and she hungered for him.

She cast her gaze downward, letting a smile cross her face. "Do you have an objection to kneeling before me, My Lord Duke?"

"It's something I do willingly," he said, a growl to his voice.

“How willingly?”

“I think you know.”

“Magnus,” she said, thrilling at the way his eye widened at the sound of his name, “I think I would enjoy a turn around the gardens.”

“My hands are dirty.”

“I don’t mind.”

He breathed in through his nose, as though he tried to compose himself, all the while looking at her as though he saw her for the first time. “Are you well enough, My Love?”

“I’m stronger than you think, Magnus, and more able.”

Tension between them pulled taut as he stood, unfolding the length of him, and approached her. She also rose, putting the blanket over her legs to one side. The sun held little warmth now, in late October, but she was in no danger of being cold as Magnus offered her his arm. “Your Grace,” he said teasingly.

With a smile at the remembrance of the formality between that had once caused such discord, she returned, “My Lord Duke.”

“Are you quite sure you’re warm enough?”

“I’m no invalid, Magnus.” She tilted her head back to look at him, though he stared straight ahead. “Look, I don’t need to lean on you to walk.”

“You may lean on me all you want, Evanora—I’m quite capable of supporting you.”

No one had ever, in all her education, thought to teach her how to tempt men to bed; now, in her current situation, that seemed a glaring oversight, and she wasn’t entirely sure how to proceed. Glancing back at the house, which was momentarily obscured by the kitchen garden’s wall, she pressed against him. “On second thoughts, I am a little chilly. Perhaps we might stop here.”

“Evanora—”

“And you may put your arm around me, if you wish.”

At her command, he draped an arm over her shoulder, but he didn't pull her into him as she'd been expecting. It felt more like a supporting arm than an amorous one.

“Oh, how cold it is,” she said, easing up against his body. Under hers, though she was trembling both from the cold and her own daring, he was hard. Awareness of his strength sank through her, and she placed her hands on his lapels. If she pulled them now, she might pull him into her, and then perhaps—

He hesitated for a moment, and then rubbed her back in a mortifyingly practical gesture. “If you're cold, My Dear, we can return to the house.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Would you stop resisting me, Magnus? I'm attempting to seduce you and you're being remarkably difficult.”

“I see.” It sounded rather as though he was trying not to laugh, but when she glared up at him in a fit of pique, he looked down at her tenderly. “My Love, do you really think all this is necessary?”

“Considering you haven't so much as approached me, I think so.”

“Ought I seduce my wife that was lately so very ill?”

“You ought if your wife demands it.”

“And do you demand it, Evanora?”

She met his gaze squarely, though her cheeks flushed, and she was aware of a rather pressing desire to run and hide. Never had she thought of confessing herself quite so openly, and the vulnerability made her feel more exposed than if he'd removed her dress there and then.

“In which case,” he breathed, leaning in until his lips were a hair's breadth from hers, “I mustn't keep a lady waiting.”

The tension snapped. Evanora caught the lapels of his waistcoat and pulled him down so his mouth covered hers. This time, their kiss was feverish. Frantic. Desperate, after so long waiting and resisting and hoping—or at least, Evanora had been hoping. She'd been waiting.

Magnus, for all the way he kissed her as though he'd been waiting all this life for this moment, hadn't yet confessed to her that he wanted her. Given she had initiated, something that although she was enjoying the fruits of, the very nature of it put her on edge.

Magnus was of course oblivious to her inner thoughts, and he pushed her up against the wall, carefully positioning his body so she was trapped against the rough brick and him, and although she couldn't be certain, she thought she felt that rod against her stomach once again.

Johanna had once, in a rather heated discussion of married life, mentioned a man's rod. It was the center point of his desire, and oftentimes men thought with their rod rather than with their head.

This man, Evanora thought crossly, didn't appear to give it a second's thought. She broke away, breathless, and he immediately turned his attention to the sensitive skin around her neck. His lips were warm, but his tongue was even warmer, and she shuddered as it flicked out and licked the hollow of her throat.

"Magnus," she said, pushing at his shoulders. He stopped. "Do you love me?"

Tension racked through his body and he leaned back, bracing a hand on the wall behind her. "Is that what you expect from me?"

"It's only... you've never said it."

"What is women's fascination with the idea everything must be voiced for it to be real, or that nothing is valid unless it's given the placed under the banner of love? Can I not like you, can I not want you? Is that not enough?"

It was as though a bucket of cold water had been tossed over her, and she gasped at the sensation. Asking him if he loved her was premature; she'd been long assured of her feelings, but this had been a mistake. He didn't love her; the hard cast of his mouth and the whitened knuckles of the fist by his side assured her of that. "I

presume you do not, then.”

“You may presume what you wish,” he said coldly. “Come, it must be nearly time for dinner.”

“We can’t be about to return after—”

“How do you recommend we proceed?” He stepped back, and she was reminded once again of his size relative to her. Even Luther, who’d also towered over her, had never looked quite so intimidating. “Would you rather we continued to argue?”

“I hardly see there’s anything worth arguing about.” How could something that had started so promisingly have devolved into this? “It was merely a question; you could have merely said you do not, and that could have been the end of it.”

He laughed, a bitter edge to the sound. “A poor time for such a question.”

“You may think so.”

His nostrils flared white as he stepped back. “Let me be clear about one thing, Evanora. This is a marriage of convenience, and though our companionship comes as a pleasant surprise, and you should know I enjoy your company, I made a vow to protect you and care for you as befits a husband. That does not involve love—do not demand it from me.”

Do not demand it from me.

She had been deceived; all this time she’d supposed they’d been growing closer. She’d foolishly assumed that because of his compassion, because of his anger on her behalf, and his concern for her illness, because of the way he’d kissed her with such passion, he’d grown attached to her. But this was a marriage of convenience, and she would not be so deceived again.

“I understand, My Lord Duke,” she said, her voice sounding as though it came from very far away. “Allow me to apologize for the misunderstanding. You can be assured it won’t happen again.”

He sighed and pressed two fingers against the bridge of his nose.
“Evanora, wait—”

“Thank you for your companionship—it was a surprise for me also.”
Dipping into a curtsy, she stalked back to the Castle with one aim: to get inside, out of view of Magnus, before she dissolved into the tears that beckoned.



Damn his cursed temper.

Magnus was not a man for whom confessing feelings came easily, and having such a question posed to him so candidly, as though he could confess such a thing with ease. As though it was an emotion he was prepared to consider or acknowledge.

There could be no doubt he wanted Evanora. She devoured his attention; he craved her unceasingly whenever she was near, and her artless attempts to seduce him yesterday had been both sweet and arousing. He had thought their mutual desire—for there could be no doubt also that she desired him, however short-lived the emotion would prove to be—would be enough.

He had been wrong.

“Are you still wishful of visiting town, Evanora?” he asked at dinner, when the table—thankfully—separated them. Even so, her magnificent eyes flashed at him in a way that suggested if he were closer, he would not have a head for long.

“I am desirous of seeing my father and brother, My Lord Duke.”

So that was now it would be, with no thought of amusement or teasing. “Of course, you would be more than welcome to visit them, My Dear.”

She lifted her chin. “I wish to stay with them.”

Magnus nodded at the footmen and Brisket who waited on them. “You may leave us.”

Evanora watched them leave, a flush on her cheekbones. When she turned to him, dark honey-brown hair tangled around her face, he thought she'd never looked so beautiful. "Are you protecting our reputation against gossip, Your Grace? Can you not trust what my tongue will say next?"

"Not when you're in a temper like that," he said calmly. "You must know when we visit town you'll be staying with me."

"I hardly see why."

"Because we're married."

"In name only," she flashed.

And if he'd had his way, many months ago it would have been far more than that. "The fact remains, Evanora, we must not give the ton cause to gossip."

A bitter smile curved her lips. "I've been the subject of gossip and derision for over six years, My Lord Duke. I hardly think staying with my father will be so very shocking."

"When I agreed to marry you, I promised your father I would do my best to protect you and shield you from unpleasantness. Consider this me fulfilling my promise."

"Odious man."

"Ungrateful woman."

Bosom heaving, she glared at him and, upon seeing he wasn't likely to change his mind, flung down her napkin. "I suppose you take a great pleasure in wielding your power so," she said, her voice constricted. "I had thought we could find ways to be happy together, but evidently you have other ideas. Good day, My Lord Duke."

He inclined his head. "Duchess."

As the door slammed behind her, he dropped his head in his hands. Her father had assured him she was pliable and steady, but Evanora had proven since to be anything but. Passionate, brave, and spirited,

she had a temper to match his, and he both hated and loved it. But he'd be damned if he'd let her stay with her father and breathe life into the rumors that she was being mistreated by him. If he allowed that, and if her family held enough sway over her, their marriage could be over.

And by God, he didn't want it to be over. Tossing his napkin to his plate, much as Evanora had done, he left the room. Rather than go in search of her, however, he gave orders for his horse to be mounted and strode around the courtyard.

I had thought we could find ways to be happy together, but evidently you have other ideas.

"Good God, Woman," he muttered as he mounted his stallion, aptly named Dante, and kicked his heels. Dante tossed his head, obeyed his master's command and eased into a gallop. The wind raked fingers through Magnus' hair and cooled his overflowing temper. Infuriating woman that she should be so caught up with words she forgot to consider actions.

His father had been a man of words: empty words that concealed a lack of consideration for anyone but himself. He had promised Magnus' mother the world, and failed to deliver anything but a rack of debts he continued to accrue, even when he assured her gaming was behind him. Even when she begged him to stop, and he had told her his love for her could make him do anything—except, it transpired, give up anything he had no mind to.

Magnus had long ago concluded his father had never loved his mother—though she had long cherished a silent and often tearful adoration of him—and had subsequently lost all faith in expressions of affection. All they meant was that whoever professed them had command over their tongue—hardly a commendable achievement. No... true expression of affection could be seen through actions.

Evanora had not appeared to be a woman who relied on empty assurances. He had not thought she relied on—no, *expected*—love from him.

But he should have handled it better. His response, born from anger, had alienated her from him, and he had no idea how to fix it without telling her he loved her—something he couldn't be sure of. At what

point did affection cross that barrier? He cared for her, and he had no wish to examine his feelings further. With love came vulnerability, as he'd seen from his mother, and he'd strived to avoid it thus far; to allow her into a heart he'd fortified would be a mistake.

Finally, he arrived at the folly. Under the bright fall leaves, it looked almost mystical, and although it was smaller than it had ever seemed as a child, the worn stone still held remnants of the same magic.

Evanora had looked marvelous here, ducking through the doorways and brushing her fingertips across the walls with all his childhood wonder. Since his mother's death, he hadn't thought anyone could bring this place to life again, but she had done it.

Since then, staying away from her had been harder still, and now it seemed nigh-on impossible. The idea that once they'd been strangers—reluctant, even, to spend time with each other—was ludicrous.

He climbed the ancient stairs to the tower, where she had stood in all her resplendent glory, and he'd been unable to do anything but watch as she smiled and twirled like a fairie goddess. Fall had changed the forest, and soon the first frosts would come, chasing the elite back to town for the season. Argument or no, Magnus was determined she should be there too, taking her rightful place at society's helm, and putting to bed all the hateful rumors.

In time, he hoped she would forgive his harsh words. Until then, he would strive to treat her with the care and respect she deserved, and if the opportunity came to reassure her of his affection—of his desire—he would do so. All he could do for now was wait.

Chapter Thirteen

Once it had been established they were to leave for town, and once the physician had given his approval, things moved rather quickly. Magnus seemed determined to get them to town for the beginning of the season, and although part of her wanted to rebel against it, there was another part—the part of her that, no matter how bruised and vulnerable their argument had left them, craved his approval—that saw his eagerness as an opportunity to please her. That, despite their argument, he held her in some affection.

“Are you excited to return to town?” he asked as she stood on the gallery, staring at the painting of his father. Unlike Magnus, his father looked a hard man, and his fast life hadn’t been easy on his face.

She cupped her elbows, holding herself upright to prevent herself from reaching for him, as every part of her body craved. “Do you ever miss your father?”

“Not in the slightest.”

She looked at him, marking the kindness that lingered where cruelty had marked his father. “Is that easier, do you think, than missing him?”

“Having never had the luxury of missing him, or being even remotely interested in his wellbeing, I couldn’t tell you.” He approached with easy strides, and settled altogether too close to her, until his arm almost brushed hers. “I almost had his portrait removed, you know, when he died.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“My mother loved him,” he said simply, “and I rather thought it an ugly tribute to her memory.”

“You could have it removed from the gallery.”

“Perhaps I shall, in time.”

“And this was you,” she said, moving on to a painting of Magnus that must have been done when he was many years younger, because it was without his scar. She’d spent many hours staring at it, of late, wondering what he would’ve looked like if she’d met him without his scar, and whether she’d have loved him as much. “When was it painted?”

“I was two-and-twenty,” he said, “having decided, upon finishing at Oxford, to join Britain’s finest.”

“You look so young.”

“It was eight years ago now, Evanora.”

She loved the way his voice caressed his name, and she squeezed her elbows tighter to avoid reaching out to him. There would be no reaching, no confessions, no tenderness, until she could be sure she was not the only one with her heart on the line. “Are we ready to depart?”

“We are.” He held out his hand, and she walked past him without taking it, her heart beating slightly too fast. Not daring to look behind, she descended the stairs so fast she almost tripped, and joined Johanna at the door.

“Here, let me help you,” she said, taking a bandbox from her confused lady’s maid, and hurrying out to the carriage.

Returning to London was, if she were honest, a rather exciting prospect. Although much of her attention was on the man sitting next to her—her attempts to sit with Johanna had been stumped by both the Duke and Johanna herself—she was also engaged in looking out of the window and remembering with fondness how loud London was. It had always been the same whenever they’d arrived back to town from their Estate, and although Charles had always yawned at the traders going about their business, and her father had attempted to read a

newspaper, she had always spent her time looking and listening and wondering.

“Anyone would think it was your first time,” Magnus said, amused.

“Do you not glory at the sound of it?” she asked, forgetting their constraint as a smile spread across her face. “London is always alive—can’t you feel its pounding heart? I used to want to explore when I was a child, and see all the sights, but Mama didn’t think it was proper, and Father wasn’t interested. As for Charles.” She made a face at the mention of her brother, who had always been more interested in cards and being a young blade than in culture. “Well, I could never persuade him to accompany me.”

“Pray, what sights were you wishful of seeing that your mother didn’t think appropriate?”

Another smile, this one devious and a little self-conscious, tugged at her mouth, and she turned away so Magnus wouldn’t see. “Why, only Covent Garden, and perhaps Bartholomew Fair.”

“I see,” Magnus said, with remarkable self-restraint.

“Charles has been, you see, and he told me many tales of how they were. Of course,” she added with the hindsight only age and maturity can bring, “I imagine he was leaving a great deal out, but it still sounded like just the place.”

“Indeed, *just* the place for a young lady of fortune.”

“You may laugh, but I was very tempted to go a few years ago. After all, even if news of it *did* get out, I could hardly be thought worse of.”

“Admirable logic, My Dear.”

She folded her hands demurely in her lap. “I thought that perhaps—as we’re married and you know we aren’t likely to see anyone of note there—perhaps we could visit Covent Garden. Or Vauxhall Gardens, to see the fireworks. Mama didn’t like the fireworks, either.”

“If once we’ve reestablished ourselves in society,” he said, “you still have a wish to visit Vauxhall Gardens or Covent Garden—I draw the

line at Bartholomew Fair—then we shall go together.”

A marriage of convenience was not how she'd hoped her eventual marriage would be, and perhaps he would never love her. Still, it was more than she'd ever hoped for, and so she beamed. “Thank you, Magnus, I'm much obliged.”

With a small smile, though at what she couldn't be sure, curling his thin lips, he inclined his head. “As always, My Dear, it's my pleasure.”



It pained Magnus he couldn't provide Evanora with the Norwood Townhouse his family had, until recently, possessed in Grosvenor Square. Recent demands on his purse had, unfortunately, necessitated he give it up, and he hadn't until Evanora's illness considered they might spend any considerable time in town.

If they were to scotch these rumors, however, he would have to be present, and society would have to see what good terms they were on, and how much respect he afforded his wife. He was, too, concerned for her health. Though she claimed she was all but recovered, there was a paleness to her that worried him. Seeing her family and the delights of town would hopefully boost her recovery, and make the ordeal worth it.

“It's not the most fashionable house,” he said as they alighted from the carriage, her gloved hand in his, “but I hope it'll be to your satisfaction.”

The house was small and slightly outdated, with a narrow hallway and a small parlor, but the drawing room was spacious, and the dining room more than sufficient—at least for his needs. Evanora pursed her lips as she gazed around. “It's certainly cozy,” she said.

“I fear we won't be able to entertain much.”

“Oh, well, who could we think of entertaining save Papa and Charles?” she asked with an artless smile that disarmed him. He'd convinced himself she'd be desperate to flout her newfound status as Duchess, and to find she had no intention of doing was a welcome surprise. “As you know, I had few friends here, and certainly none I would consider welcoming to our house.”

Impulsively, he took her hand and pressed it to his lips. She started, and her gaze fixed on him, but she didn't pull away, and he placed his other hand across her fingers. Every inch of him urged him to take her up into his arms, to kiss her lovely face and to press her up against the wall, but she was pale after their long journey, and now would not be the best time to force his amorous advances on her. Though she'd accepted this caress with surprised acquiescence, he couldn't be sure she'd permit anything further, and so he released her. "You look tired, My Love," he said. "Might I suggest you rest before dinner?"

"I'm quite all right—" she started.

"Then perhaps you might do it for my peace of mind. I have a few errands, but I'll be back before you know it." He kissed her hand again, letting his lips linger across her knuckles, before striding from the room. Even now, when illness had stripped the color from her, he wanted her more than was reasonable for a level-headed man. No woman had ever possessed the power to turn reason from him, and she would not be the first. No, he would endeavor to control himself—at least until he was of a mind to confess his feelings, and she was of a mind to accept his advances.

Sir Robert Blackmoor was at home and dining with his wife when Magnus arrived. As ever unfazed, Blackmoor waved Magnus to a seat. "Do join us, old boy," he said, gesturing for another place to be laid at his other side. "I hope you like cold ham."

"Blackmoor, Lady Blackmoor." Magnus inclined his head and, seeing Blackmoor had no intention of being parted from his food, sank into the seat. "I do hope I'm not interrupting."

Lady Blackmoor smiled shyly. "Not at all, Your Grace."

"As you can see, we enjoy the quiet life now, don't we, My Love?"

"Indeed, Husband." Lady Blackmoor glanced down at her plate and blushed, a bashful smile quivering on her lips. Magnus could guess the cause of that smile, and perhaps the reason for the quiet life. Blackmoor had never been the settling-down type, and Magnus suspected he'd soon tire of his wife no matter how pretty she was, but for now the marital bliss was evident—and Magnus, despite his best efforts, couldn't prevent envy from stabbing his chest.

"I presume you've arrived with your lady wife?" Blackmoor asked. "Will you be attending Almack's on Wednesday?"

"I can't answer for certain, but I presume so."

"Excellent." He poured himself a glass of wine and eyed Magnus in that way he had, where no thoughts felt sacred or private. "I'm certain you'll want to be friends with the Duchess of Norwood, My Love," he said to his wife. "We must be certain to make our friendship known."

Magnus couldn't imagine having such a pliant wife as Lady Blackmoor, who merely smiled and nodded. She did not presume to ask questions, to challenge, or to simply refuse a request; her husband's word was law, and she knew her place. It sounded, Magnus privately thought, rather dull.

As though sensing her role in the conversation was over, she rose gracefully. "If you'll excuse me, My Dear, Your Grace, I have some letters to attend to."

Magnus and Blackmoor stood, although Blackmoor sank back into his chair as soon as his wife made for the door. Magnus remained standing until the door had closed.

"Yes, she's a treasure," Blackmoor said goodnaturedly. "A real peach."

"Happiness suits you."

"Aye, well, the novelty's wearing off now, but I won't deny we had a good time of it, and she's a sweet girl. Very respectable, too—her family was outraged when she threw herself after me."

Magnus, well aware of Blackmoor's propensity for exaggeration, merely smiled. "I rather think Evanora might terrify her."

"Oh, she looks timid, but you can be sure she can hold her own in the ballroom, Norwood. Tongue like a dagger, and twice as deadly. You'll see on Wednesday. Now, I presume you're here about the results?"

"Correct."

"This way. I left them in my study—just in case, you understand. It's

all bad dealings.”

Blackmoor’s study was a small room with heavy mahogany furniture and green wallpaper that, rather than brightening the place up, resulted in it feeling somewhat dingy. A long desk stood against one wall, an armchair in the corner, and a bookcase was filled with both books and sheafs of paper, neatly packaged and bound by ribbon and string.

“My contact analyzed the contents,” Blackmoor said, producing a letter from the piles of correspondence on his desk. “All can be found on English soil, and all are varying degrees of poisonous.”

Magnus took the letter and scanned it. The list of identified ingredients was extensive and included foxglove, belladonna, and wolfbane.

“Your wife was lucky to survive,” Blackmoor said grimly. “There’s no doubt someone wanted her dead.”

Magnus remained standing, rage rising like boiling lava. Lore was behind this, he was certain, but to think that he could wish Evanora such ill that she was dead—that, surely, would be impossible. Except he had the evidence before him to say that it was not impossible; someone had deliberately attempted to take her life.

“Have you identified the writing?” he asked, his voice clipped. “It’s disguised to look like mine, but there are clear differences.”

“Not yet. That’s a much more challenging business, as you well know. We have identified where this paper was bought, and I can provide you with a list of everyone who visited the shop over the past six months, although I warn you the list is extensive.”

“It’s of no consequence.”

Blackmoor moved to his bookcase and examined the papers collected there. Impatient, Magnus paced the room and snatched the double-sided sheaf Blackmoor handed him. He had been telling the truth: the list was indeed extensive. Most of the ton were on there, in fact. Magnus scanned until he found Lord Lore, who had by all accounts purchased writing paper three times in the past six months.

“Many thanks,” he said, folding it and putting it in his pocket. “I should return to my wife. After everything, I hardly dare leave her.”

“It’s worth ascertaining whether these ingredients can be found on your Estate,” Blackmoor said, waving the letter. “You are certain it’s Lord Lore, but I warn you not to discount other avenues before you’ve explored them. A closed mind may never find success.”

“Who else bears her such a grudge?” Magnus demanded. “Lord Lore is the only enemy she has—there are certainly none on my Estate.”

“Nevertheless, old boy”—Blackmoor’s gaze was both sharp and steady—“don’t act without evidence.”

“You may be certain of that.” Magnus smiled grimly; it wasn’t a pleasant smile, one more seen on the battlefield than in England’s rolling countryside, but perhaps that was appropriate. After all, by harming Evanora, his enemy was declaring war, and if there was one thing Magnus knew how to do, it was how to fight.

Chapter Fourteen

The very first thing Evanora did, before anything else, was visit her father and brother. To her surprise, Magnus insisted on accompanying her, and they made their way to Rathbone Manor together.

Mortimer, having already been appraised of their impending visit, greeted them at their front door. "My Darling," he said, kissing her cheek. "How wonderful to see you."

"And you, Papa." Evanora squeezed his hand and, seeing his anxious look over her face, added, "I was a little ill these past few weeks, but I'm almost recovered now, and I'm so happy to see you again."

Magnus, beside her, bowed. "Lord Cane. Thank you for welcoming me into your home."

Her father, rather than smiling at her husband with his usual effusion, merely nodded. "I could not deny entry to my daughter's husband."

"Papa," Evanora chastised.

"It's all right—" Magnus started, but she cut him off with a wave of her hand and frowned at her father. He, too, looked pale and tired, as though he hadn't been sleeping well. Swollen bags hung under his eyes like caterpillars, and there were pouches along his jaw that spoke of excess.

"Are you well, Papa?"

"Of course." Mortimer patted her cheek clumsily. "Do come in. Charles rarely rises before noon, but he will be just as excited to

receive you. I believe he was concerned by your lack of letters.”

Evanora laughed, diverted. “For what reason does he expect letters? We both know if I was to write frequently, I would only receive the occasional scrawl in return. Charles is notoriously bad at letter writing. But if he was concerned, he should have written to me, and you know I would have responded straightaway.”

“As I suggested several times, but I believe he was reluctant to disturb you.”

Evanora laughed again, but this time the sound was devoid of humor. She glanced at Magnus, whose single eye was grim, and whose mouth was pinned together. Those were the signals of approaching anger, and although his self-control was held on a tight leash—that she knew beyond anything—his quiet fury disturbed her. “Tell me, Papa, did anything spur this sudden concern for my wellbeing?”

“I believe it was merely—” He sighed and slumped into an armchair. Evanora took her place on the sofa, smoothing her skirts so there was no crease in the muslin. It was compulsive, and she hardly noticed she was doing it until Magnus caught her hand and squeezed it.

The gesture was over almost as soon as it had begun, but it sent warmth through her, and she could hardly stop the smile that spread across her face, even when her father continued to speak. “There have been some rumors,” he said heavily, with a glance at Magnus. Evanora had not presumed her father to be afraid of her husband, but that glance bespoke fear. “Rumors that you are unhappy, my child.”

She stiffened her back. “And from where, pray, did these rumors originate?”

“I can’t be certain, but—”

“Given my past and my disfigurement, they hold some credibility,” Magnus finished smoothly. “I quite see how you came to be convinced, Cane.”

“I do not,” Evanora flashed. Though she had spent weeks in convalescence, illness had not dimmed her temper. “After you offered my hand to the Duke, Papa, can you really think so little of him? And if you did, a simple visit to the Castle would have convinced you

otherwise.”

“Had the tone of your letters indicated you were unhappy, I would have done.”

“The tone of my letters was an accurate reflection of my state of mind,” she said coldly. “Be assured that had I needed assistance, I would have asked for it.”

“Yes, of course—” her father began, but Charles threw the door to the drawing room open.

“What the deuce—Evanora!” Immaculately presented, though she had no doubt the night before had been heavy, Charles kissed his sister elegantly on both cheeks. “This is a welcome surprise. How long are you to be staying?”

“I’m not staying, Charles, merely visiting.” Evanora didn’t miss the suspicious glance her brother gave Magnus, and decided to set the matter straight. “Papa tells me there have been some rumors about the state of my happiness, and I believe you’ve been concerned, dearest. Pray don’t be—I’m quite happy and find married life to my liking.”

Charles’ suspicion melted into confusion, and he sent the Duke another look she struggled to decipher. Magnus, however, in a cool tone, said, “I’m not prone to mistreating those in my care, Lord Rathbone, you may be assured of that.”

“Yes. Well.” Charles threw himself into a chair and rang the bell for refreshments. “What a God-awful mess,” he remarked.

Evanora thought she saw a tremor of a smile on Magnus’ face, but when he spoke, his voice was quite steady. “May I ask where these rumors originated?”

“Lord, I haven’t the faintest. One night I didn’t give it a second’s thought, and the next the ton was talking about it like it was assumed your absence from town was due to some—oh, I don’t know, some nefarious dealings.” Charles’ good-natured smile spread across his face, and Evanora was reminded that while he ran with a wilder set now, he was still a child in many ways. “Saying it like that sounds ridiculous.”

"It does," Magnus agreed. "May we rely on your support as we venture into society?"

Evanora stole a glance at her husband, but he was focused intently on Charles, who shuffled uncomfortably.

"Of course," Mortimer said, spreading his hands. "We've weathered the storm before, and I can assure anyone who asks with certainty that we're convinced of your health and happiness." A puckered frown appeared between his brows. "Well, of your happiness at least."

"Why?" Charles said, catching the look. "Are you not well, Evanora?"

She smiled widely to alleviate his concern; since their mother had died, Charles had been especially wary of illness, and now Evanora was almost recovered, she had no intention of worrying him. The reason *why* she'd been ill was not a matter with which to trouble her family. "I'm merely a little under the weather," she said soothingly. "Magnus thought the diversions of town and the pleasure of family would assist my recovery, but as you can see, I'm all but recovered now."

Once again, Magnus brushed her hand with his, and that same warmth spread through his body at his silent support. Remaining cold and aloof with a man who made every nerve tingle with each touch, and who treated her with every deference, was impossible, and so she smiled at him.

"We're planning on visiting Hyde Park for a walk after lunch," she said, addressing the room at large. "Would you be interested in joining us?"

Charles, to no one's surprise, laughed. "I think not, Evanora. You know how I despise walking."

"Papa?"

"Not for me," he said, smiling at them with good-natured affection. "It'll do you no harm to spend time together without your old father looking over at you. A married woman needs no chaperone with her husband."

Evanora glanced up at Magnus and slipped her arm through his. It was

an impulsive gesture, almost unconsciously made, but a little of the tension in his arm seeped away. “Then we shall go on our own,” she said.



Magnus despised being in public. He hated the looks everyone gave him, as though he were a different being because of his scar and eyepatch. It would be worse if he removed the patch, he thought grimly, although Evanora hadn't seemed to think so.

His wife was a different breed of woman, he'd come to realize, and the standards to which she held herself were a far cry from the standards women at large held themselves. Where she was kind, they were cruel, and where she was respectful, they were intrusive. No one had mastered the art of disemboweling a man through the sharpness of their tongue quite like the young lady of quality.

Hyde Park, one of the most fashionable parts of London, was immensely busy by the time they reached it. Young ladies, arm in arm, wandered through the paths in search of eligible young gentlemen, rather like sharks hunting blood. Young ladies and gentlemen rode past them, and Magnus wondered if Evanora secretly wished she were up there rather than hanging on his arm. Though she had professed an interest in walking, he knew cutting a dash in a phaeton was what most young ladies aspired toward. Though Evanora was not most young ladies, he couldn't be certain she didn't want more than he could offer.

As they approached a bench before the Serpentine River, Evanora paused, gazing out across the water. It was grey now, but in summer he had no doubt it was beautiful.

“This used to be my favorite place,” she said as they sat. She didn't take her gaze away from the view. “I want to thank you for accompanying me here. Charles was never fond of walking, and neither is my father, but Mama used to take me here. We would sit on this very bench and just *be*. With the hustle and bustle of life, especially when Lord Lore took an interest in me, being here like this... well, it reminds me of being a child.”

“Was life so much better then?”

Those eyes, more brown than green in their wistfulness, turned to his. “Not better, precisely, but Mama was alive then, and I rather thought things would be simpler than they’ve become.”

“Evanora, if there’s—”

“My,” a sharp voice said, “I wasn’t expecting to see you here today, Lady Rathbone. No—do excuse me—Your Grace.”

The voice belonged to an equally sharp-faced young lady, whose beauty was marred by the malicious gleam in her blue eyes. She wore a hat with a large, drooping ostrich feather, and fanned her copious bosom. Magnus hadn’t seen her before, but judging by her age—she could not have been older than nineteen—he was hardly surprised.

“Miss Weatherby,” Evanora said in a tone of wearied patience. “I hope you’re well?”

“Exceedingly.” Those sharp eyes snapped to him. “Your Grace, it’s a pleasure.”

He ought, at this moment, to say something polite in return, but false politeness had never been his strong suit, and so he merely inclined his head. The woman hovering behind Miss Weatherby, clearly her chaperone, winced at her charge’s forwardness.

“Oh, this is Mrs. Mason,” Miss Weatherby said with affected carelessness, waving a hand at this aforementioned lady. “Your Grace, I have to say, I wasn’t expecting to see you in town. I was *assured* you were far too happily married in the country to return.”

The insinuation was clear, and Magnus’ anger rose, but Evanora merely smiled. “Married life does indeed suit me, Miss Weatherby, but you may recall my family are in town.”

“Why, *they* might visit *you*.”

That struck a mark; Evanora’s mouth tightened. Magnus wished he could throw Miss Weatherby and her smug triumph into the river. “I have a taste for company,” was all Evanora said.

Miss Weatherby glanced at Magnus again, visibly lifting a lip as she

examined his scar. This had been what he'd dreaded encountering: disgust and ridicule on account of his disfigurement. Six years with the scar hadn't been enough to get him used to the way people looked at him.

"Excuse me," Evanora said sharply. Both Magnus and Miss Weatherby glanced at her in surprise. "I would appreciate it if you would treat my husband and myself with basic common courtesy. He is not some kind of poor caged animal to be gawked at. That goes for you, too," she snapped to a group in the distance, who'd also stopped to gawk. "One man's misfortune is not cause for morbid fascination."

The young ladies tittered and hurried on, heads together, and Miss Weatherby turned a rather unflattering shade of puce. Magnus' chest swelled, though he couldn't pinpoint the emotion; only that he wanted to pull Evanora into his arms and never let her go. His world contracted until all he could see and feel was the woman beside him, resplendent in a green dress that matched her eyes. She was everything, and he felt her every breath, the quivering anger inside her, as though it was his own.

"Thank you for your welcome to the city," Evanora said to Miss Weatherby as she rose. The girl, temporarily stripped of speech, watched them walk away, Evanora's hand firmly tucked in his arm. If they'd been anywhere else, he'd have taken her into his arms and pressed kisses across her face, but they were still under so much scrutiny he didn't dare. Besides, she was still shaking with anger. "I can't believe you just let them get away with that," she fumed, her voice tight. "They were looking at you as though you were some kind of exhibit in a freak show."

"I'm afraid that's a consequence of being in society." Unable to stop himself, he pulled her to a halt and put his hand on her cheek. "You can't fight the world, My Love."

She blinked, her mouth quivering. "I would if I could."

"I would not have you do so." He rubbed his thumb across her cheek once more, savoring every touch. If perfection could be personified, she would materialize in the form of the woman who walked on his arm. She was divine, and she was his, although he wanted her to be his in every way, not just in the eyes of the world. "Though I must say I appreciate the sentiment, and... the way you stood up for me. No

one's ever done that for me before. Not like that."

"They should have done."

"Regardless, they have not." Reluctantly, he dropped his hand and offered her his arm again. Now wasn't the time to show her quite how much her defense of him had meant, but his willpower was reaching the end of its tether. No man could resist a woman as perfect as she for long, and she would shortly find out precisely what she meant to him.

Chapter Fifteen

A letter awaited them when they arrived home, effectively putting all other thoughts from Magnus' head.

Your Grace,

I hesitate to contact you, but it appears the first batch of Norwood beer is not doing as well as we'd hoped. Prior to bottling and shipping, the men tasted it, to ensure everything was in order, and one man vomited almost instantly. There's a strange taste to it, and we're quite certain something must have gone wrong with the brewing process; it is unpalatable and possibly even dangerous. We're in the process of testing the rest now, but I fear production may have to be halted until we've found the cause of this.

Yours,

John Williams

"What is it?" Evanora asked anxiously, examining his face. "Is it bad news?"

Since her illness, although she'd all but recovered now, he'd been increasingly reluctant to inform her of anything that might prove worrying. "Just business," he said, folding the letter. "Are you well, Evanora? Do you want to rest?"

"Really, Magnus, you must stop treating me as though I'm a china doll. I'm perfectly well. What was your news?"

His news wasn't the sort he wanted to dwell on; shortly, he would need to address it, and even travel back to Norwood Castle to ensure nothing had gone wrong with the brewing process—or indeed that it

had not been tampered with in any way—but there was nothing he could do about it now. Evanora, however, deserved to know the truth.

“There’s been an issue with the Norwood beer,” he said. “A minor setback. Nothing to worry about.”

“Are you quite sure? Do you wish to go back to the Estate?”

Dear, wonderful Evanora, always putting her feelings behind everyone else’s. He wasn’t entirely sure when she’d become so dear to him, but her selflessness touched him in a way he couldn’t quite express, and so he reached out a hand and rubbed a thumb across her full lower lip. “I have no wish to leave you,” he said, sincerity in every syllable. “In fact—forgive me, Evanora, but there are many things I would like to do.”

That mouth, luscious and sweet, opened, and hot breath swept over his skin. “Such as?”

If he was to give into his desire for her, things would have to be different from last time. He would need to offer her emotional vulnerability. The difference, from last time, was that he’d given it thought, and he was prepared to give her this, if it was what she needed.

“I want you,” he said, his voice little more than a growl. “Whatever else you may be uncertain of, you may rely on that. If assurance is what you need—if then and only then you wish to proceed—then you may have it. If my actions are not sufficient, let my words be so. I want you, and I have wanted you ever since that first night.”

Though desire pooled in those hazel-green eyes—there was no brown to be seen there now—a corner of her mouth quirked into a smile. “When you told me you would never force yourself on me?”

“Even then.”

“And,” she whispered, lifting her face up to his, “do you want me now?”

“More than anything.”

“Then kiss me.”

He would do more than just kiss her, but for now, he cupped the back of her head with his hand, tangling her silky curls between his fingers, and lowered his mouth down to hers. As always, her lips were soft and he sank into them, sank into her; never before had he longed for someone the way he longed for her. Never before he had drank someone up as though he were dying of thirst and they were holy nectar. If someone had told him she was a gift from the gods, he would have believed them. It took no stretch of the imagination to consider her an angel, exquisitely formed and achingly perfect.

She flicked her tongue against his and he bit back a groan. Remaining tender was an effort; he wanted to kiss her roughly, to make her pant and moan and scream; to lick and bite and suck on every part of her until there was no part of this luscious body he was not intimately acquainted with. Desire, heated and pointed, hardened him until he throbbed with urgency. He needed her *now*.

Their lips never parting, he swept her up and held her against him as he carried her into the study; upstairs was simply too far away. Her skirts fell back to reveal long, stockinged legs that wrapped around his waist, and he growled in masculine delight. While he walked, although walking was becoming increasingly difficult, he tugged at the ties on the back of her dress, opening it wide so that when they reached the study, he would be able to peel it from her.

He broke away from her mouth briefly as he laid her on the desk, sweeping aside the papers, and lowered his body over hers. Her legs tightened around him and she plucked at his waistcoat. Fair was fair; he shrugged from his waistcoat and she fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, sending small, exploratory hands across the planes of his chest.

It had been so long since he'd been touched by a woman like this that the sensation rendered him speechless. He remained still, balancing above her on his elbows as she gazed up into his face in wordless awe.

“May I see you?” she asked, every accent breathless.

“You wish to... see me?”

“Is that so strange?”

He smiled and brushed the side of her face with his knuckle. "Not at all, My Love. Let us see one another." With patience he hardly knew how to summon, he sat up so she could remove his cravat and unbutton his shirt. Wandering fingers sank lower down his stomach, tracing the lines of muscle, and he gripped the edge of the desk with his hand to stop himself from reaching for her. If she'd never before seen a male body, he would ensure this first time was special and unhurried, though he could have ripped her dress off and tasted her by now.

Slowly. He needed to go slowly.

"Now," he said, his voice low and grating, "it's my turn."

She looked at him coyly, eyelashes lowering over her eyes, and with a smile on lips he wanted to see around the throbbing part of him that craved her, she tucked her hands demurely in her lap.

Taking his time, he trailed his fingers along the line of her collarbone, across her neck and down the bare skin of her back. Gooseflesh followed his touch, and she shivered as he finished undoing her dress and peeled it away. Her stays soon followed, and then there was only her chemise. Leaving it on for now, though every instinct screamed at him to remove it, he turned his attention to the full breasts that swelled with each sharp breath. The nipples were already peaked, and he traced around them with first his fingers and then, bending down, his tongue.

She gasped, the sound sinking into him straight to his crotch, and took hold of his head, sliding her fingers into his hair as he flicked her nipple and then took her breast into his mouth, sucking through the material.

"Magnus," she moaned, but rather than a rebuke, it sounded more a plea to continue. "Oh, Magnus."

With his other hand, he traced up her leg, pushing the chemise up as he went, until he reached the curve at the top of her legs. Her other breast needed attention, he decided, as he toyed with the line of her hips, and her smooth stomach, and she shuffled in frustrated desire.

"Evanora," he murmured, moving up her body so he was kissing her neck. "Do you want me?"

“Yes.”

“Tell me.” It was a command, softly uttered, but a command nonetheless, and she tilted her head in deliberation. She never been the kind of woman to submit mindlessly to a man’s word, and he loved that about her, almost as much as he loved the way she murmured, her tone low and sultry, “I want you.”

At the words, he plunged his fingers into the slick wetness between her legs. She was dripping for him, and at the sensation of it, the clear demonstration that she *did* want him, he groaned. The urgency in his pants grew; he needed to have her, to feel her wet heat around him, to plunge into her with the same reckless abandon with which she lowered back her head and gasped.

There came a knock at the door. Evanora gripped his arm, and he stopped. At the second knock, he sighed and lowered his head. “What is it?” he demanded.

“Lord Lore here to see you, Your Grace,” came the answer.

Lore. The one man he had come to town to confront here at his door. This was too good an opportunity to let pass, especially given the news his beer had been contaminated—given the evidence, he had no doubt that was the case, and was equally confident the two instances of poisoning were connected.

And yet—

Evanora dressed herself quickly, her cheeks flaming red, whether with frustration or shame he didn’t know. That was to be the end of this encounter; they could not continue when she showed every possible desire to be out of the room, fully clothed, and as far away as possible.

Curse Lore.

“Could you please—?” She turned, and he laced up the back as quickly and efficiently as he could, not daring to allow his fingers to linger on her skin in case it broke his resolve. “Thank you, Magnus.”

“Evanora, My Dear—”

"I have no intention of seeing Lord Lore like this," she said, not meeting his gaze. "Please excuse me."

That she didn't want her former love to see her disheveled made perfect sense, but he couldn't resist the worm of suspicion that powered his mouth as he said, "Do you love him?"

She froze, a curious smile playing around her mouth. "Love Lord Lore? Oh, no. Remember, he has been my tormentor these past six years."

"You can love someone who torments you."

"I'm afraid your cravat is beyond repair," was all she said as she left the room.



"Oh!—I saw our new Duchess today," Miss Weatherby said.

Luther, who'd been barely attending the girl, started. "You can't mean the Duchess of Norwood."

"The very same." Miss Weatherby preened, soaking up every modicum of attention he offered; he knew she was desperate to provoke him into offering for her, but this was their first meeting in a long time, and would probably be their last. "She was walking in Hyde Park this morning with her husband. Can you believe she prevailed on him to walk with her? I declare I was quite shocked, and to think how unhandsome he is with that scar. I wonder she could bear to look at him, for I certainly could not."

"And what of the Duchess?" Luther demanded. "How did she look?"

"Dreadful, I thought. Shockingly pale, and no complexion. Of course, I never thought she was much of a beauty—I heard she was quite the thing in her heyday, but I can't see it—and it's all but lost now. I'm sure she must be quite unhappy with him."

Luther gave no answer. In truth, he had no answer to give; at no point had he anticipated Evanora might return to town with her husband in tow and make a public appearance. He'd thought that, unhappy with her home life, she might retire to town by herself and take advantage

of her newfound status.

Few married couples spent much time together outside the home, and Luther had not considered Magnus the domestic type. This discovery was, therefore, most unwelcome.

“Is that not the most unusual news?” Miss Weatherby said, peering up at him. She widened her blue eyes, perhaps in the hope of appearing more appealing and innocent, but whatever innocence she may have had, it did not take the form of purity. Luther had similarly little purity, but he appreciated it in his women—not of course the pretty pieces he saw on the side, with whom depravity was encouraged, but rather the women he sought to spend his public time and company with. Miss Weatherby had long exceeded her usefulness. This last time he saw her, however, he would endeavor to discover all he could.

“Indeed,” he said. “Most intriguing. Did she say anything of note?”

“Not of note. However, she was most exceedingly rude—not just to me but to several young ladies, merely because we looked at the Duke. It wasn’t for long, I assure you, because how could one? But she rebuked us anyway, quite publicly. It was extremely ill-mannered of her.”

“So she defended him,” Luther murmured. “How unexpected.”

“So I should think! That she should have the audacity to dress us down—her position has given her airs and graces, that’s all I can say.”

That, Luther sincerely doubted: Evanora was not one to assume airs and graces; rather, she sought the attention her natural charm brought. It was entirely more difficult to unseat a woman to whom grace came naturally, but he was not a man to balk at the challenge. “Do you know where they might be staying?” he asked. “I believe it’s time to pay the happy couple a visit.”

Chapter Sixteen

I want you.

Evanora had not anticipated Magnus being so forthcoming; after their argument in the garden, she'd been certain he would never consent to confessing his desire, and though she'd been confident of its existence, she hadn't known how much she'd needed that assurance before he gave it.

And what happened next—

It would have been enough to make her blush, if she were not still blushing from the idea that the butler might have heard the reprehensible noises Magnus was inducing her to make. A well-brought-up young lady ought not to make those sounds, but although she had tried to button her lips, she had been unable to hold back.

And now Lord Lore was here, which was enough to put an end to their clandestine meeting, though she still ached for him to finish what he had started.

"Johanna," she called as soon as she entered her dressing room. "Find me my best dress. Hurry."

Johanna, who was in the process of preparing the evening's dress, looked up in surprise. "Are you quite well?"

"Lord Lore is here. Drat it." According to the mirror, she had a hectic flush on her cheeks and a sparkle in her eyes that looked *quite* unlike her, but that she had to confess she liked. "I'm sure Magnus is already meeting with him"—though he had seemed almost unwilling to, and when he'd asked if she'd loved Lord Lore, her heart had stopped

—“and I have every intention of being there.”

Johanna, Evanora knew, perfectly understood her position, and with as much speed as she could muster, found a most becoming sprigged muslin and helped Evanora into it while Evanora did her best to fix the mess Magnus had made of her hair.

“My, I don’t remember doing the lacing up so poorly,” Johanna said with a wicked look in the mirror at Evanora. “It’s quite inexpertly done.”

“Never mind that now. Am I presentable?”

“You are, as you well know, beautiful.”

“In which case, it’s time to be perfectly gracious, and remind Lord Lore I can fight with more than anger and resentment.” She straightened her back, lifted her chin into the air, and marched downstairs into the drawing room, where she found the two men standing rather as dogs might: nose to nose and their hackles raised.

“Lord Lore,” she said breezily, entering the room in a swell of perfume and a bright smile she didn’t entirely feel. He looked just as she remembered him, with those dark eyes and a jawline that put most men to shame. Magnus, however, was not most men, and his jawline was possibly the finest she’d seen. Magnus, too, was marginally taller than Lord Lore; though the difference between them was little, Evanora knew Lord Lore well enough to know that little difference would rankle.

“Evanora,” Magnus said in surprise, stepping back. The tension in the room seeped away as Lord Lore also remembered himself. “I wasn’t expecting to see you downstairs.”

“When I heard such an *old friend*”—the emphasis she placed on those words were venomously meant—“had come to visit, of course I was obliged to pay my respects.” She held her hand to Lord Lore, who took it with confusion masked in urban grace. “How pleasant to see you, Lord Lore. I believe it’s been quite some time.”

“Indeed,” he murmured.

She couldn’t read the expression in his eyes—though in truth she’d

never been able to read it, even when she thought she knew his heart—but there was a slight uncertainty in his manner that told her she'd caught him by surprise. Excellent. With a polite smile she'd refined over years in drawing rooms, she waved him into a seat and sat herself. Magnus, alert and watchful, sat beside her.

"I wonder you have the audacity to come here," Magnus said, a delicious frisson of danger in his voice. If Evanora could have kissed him there and then for his blatant defense of her honor, she would have done it. "Have you not done enough?"

"I merely wished to congratulate the happy couple," Luther said, with a smoothness Magnus would never attain, "as I have been unable to do before now."

"I hear you too are to be congratulated." Evanora tilted her head to one side as Luther turned his attention back to her. Before her marriage, everyone had known he'd been riding out with Miss Weatherby, and judging by her rather crass attempt to put Evanora down earlier, she rather suspected the girl, at least, still cherished hopes. "Miss Weatherby has many... qualities."

Momentarily blindsided, Luther blinked, and Evanora slipped a hand across to Magnus, silently begging him to allow her this moment. "I had the pleasure of making her acquaintance in the park this morning," she continued, all too aware of Luther's discomfort, "as I'm sure you well know. I can think of no other reason why you'd call before our acquaintance at large know we've returned to town."

By the way he drew himself up, she knew she'd hit the mark. "Miss Weatherby did indeed inform me of your arrival," he said, "though I believe you've been misinformed as to the nature of our relationship."

"Oh! Pray excuse me, I was only assuming based on—but of course, you know, rumor can be extremely misleading, can it not?"

A grim smile acknowledged her hit. "It can indeed, Your Grace."

"You must stay for tea, Lord Lore." Before he could object, she rang the bell. "I've been absent from town so long I'm sure there are a great many things I've missed."

Magnus switched his gaze from her to Luther. "Yes, you must let us

know the latest scandals, Lore. I'm sure there must be many."

To her surprise, Luther smiled, although it failed to reach his eyes. "There is but one scandal that may give you cause for interest, Your Graces, and that involves you both."

"Oh?"

"Merely that your marriage is an unhappy one, or so I believe. I pay little heed to the rumors, myself."

Magnus shifted. "It surprises me to hear it."

"How so?"

"I was under the impression the rumors originated from you."

"From me?" Elegant brows rose. "Is this because of our altercation the other week? I assure you, Duke, you do not have an enemy in me."

Evanora glanced at Magnus, whose mouth was pinned in a straight, hard line. "Altercation? Pray, when was this?"

"You recall I visited town for a couple of days, My Love?" He didn't so much as look at her, so focused on Luther was he, but Evanora caught the warning tone in his voice. They'd never discussed where Magnus had gone, but now was not the time to appear anything but united.

"Ah, yes, of course," she murmured. "I remember now."

Lord Lore shifted until he was sprawled obnoxiously across the cushions as though he owned the place. "It's hardly my fault if my meeting with your husband, in a gaming hell no less, when he accused *me* of destroying your happiness, has negatively impacted public opinion. I assure you I spoke to no one of that night."

A gaming hell? Evanora kept her expression cool as she toyed with the facts. There had been some things Magnus had failed to mention. The gaming hell was one, though it was one she could overlook, but an altercation with Luther about his actions was something she was not so willing to forgive. Still, now was not the time.

“If defending my honor is a crime, I hold the Duke fully accountable,” she said. “While society at large may not be fully aware precisely what passed between us all those years ago, you may be sure my husband is.”

“And you may be certain I fully believe my wife,” Magnus added.

“Admirable, I’m sure,” Luther murmured. “Such conjugal bliss is not so easy to find, I fancy.”

“All it requires is a little respect, Lore, although I hardly think you know much about that.” Magnus stood just as the tea Evanora had ordered arrived. “Before you leave, tell me something. Have you been in town all season?”

Luther frowned, as well he might. Magnus’ question made little sense to Evanora, either—there was no reason she could see why Luther should have been absent from town, or why Magnus should concern himself about it. “Aside from a brief visit to my hunting lodge, I have. Why do you ask?”

“I have my reasons.”

Luther bowed. “I can see I’ve intruded on your time long enough. I wish you every happiness.”

Magnus said nothing, and Evanora merely curtsied as Luther left. They stood in silence for a while, Evanora lingering over his words and rejoicing that for once she was able to stand up against him without the fear of threats—Magnus’ presence at least did that—and Magnus was also lost in thought.

“You visited town and had an altercation with Lord Lore?” she asked, remembering that pertinent point. “Why did you not tell me?”

“I didn’t want to worry you.”

“If you made a scene—”

“He was exaggerating to cause a rift between us. The rumors began long before I visited.”

“And why did you visit?”

He sighed. “I had my suspicions about the contents of your tea.”

“Oh.” Evanora had, however briefly, forgotten about the tea, and the implications thereof, but she’d spent enough time considering it while at the Castle to merely say, “Yes, I suspect it was deliberate, but I can conceive of no one who’d harbor resentment against me enough to wish me dead.”

His blue eye was bleak. “Can you not, My Love?”

“Lord Lore is reprehensible, but he’s not a murderer. Consider, if he’d had a taste to murder, he might have poisoned my father.”

“As his main political opponent, he must have known he’d be a suspect in that event.”

“And is he in this situation any different? All of society knows he and I have had our differences—if we were to make my illness public, and to broadcast it was a deliberate attempt on my life, he would also be a suspect.”

“Less so now you’re my wife.”

“Perhaps more so because I’m your wife,” she countered, taking his hand and smoothing over the calloused skin. These were not the hands of a lord, they were the hands of a man who’d lived and experienced and bore the scars of that experience across his knuckles. “I’m now out of his reach in every other way.”

“Do you believe him to be innocent?”

She laughed and reached up to kiss him; the movement was hesitant, but the warmth of his lips and the strength of his embrace reassured her. “Lord Lore has never been innocent,” she murmured, “but I would be wary of accusing him of this, at least until there is evidence.”

“I will do nothing until I have evidence. Until then, can I ask you to never be alone with him? Or leave your drinks unguarded?”

She drew back. “Magnus, I—”

“Please, Evanora.”

“I have no intention to be alone with Lord Lore—or, indeed, do I wish to be alone with any other man.”

Desire darkened his eye like a stormy sea, and she drowned in the thoughts of what that desire meant; what they could do together if they were to give into that desire again right now. It had bubbled under the surface all the while Luther had been there, but he’d gone, and there was nothing to prevent them from picking up where they’d left off.

After all, she had no desire to be alone with any other man, but she did desire being alone with him and learning more about the male body. What she’d seen of it, how she’d touched him and how he’d responded to her hands like he was coming alive under them—she craved that more than anything. More, even, than his hands on her, although at the thought of that, heat pulsed at her core.

There was a knock on the door, breaking Magnus’ gaze from her.

“Mr. Peter Holland to see you, Your Grace,” he said.

“You should have told me you were in town,” Peter said as Magnus strode into the room. Unusually, the Duke was flushed and bore a look Peter was unaccustomed to seeing on his friend’s face; it bespoke frustration, and Magnus had been remarkably unshakeable throughout their friendship. “I trust I haven’t interrupted anything.”

Magnus flung himself into a chair. “It wouldn’t be the first time today. How are you?”

“Rather more pleased to see you than you are to see me, I fear.” Peter laced his hands over his knee and nodded that he would like a drink. “I was surprised to hear you were in town. I thought you preferred to keep a distance from society.”

That made Magnus look up with a sharp look in his eye as he poured the amber liquid into Peter’s glass. “Are you aware of the rumors circulating about the way I’ve been treating my wife?”

“Mere trifles, I assure you,” Peter said, keeping his voice cool and waving an airy hand. “I didn’t see the need to trouble you, especially

as I had no idea of your returning to town.”

“It’s primarily on account of my wife.”

“Has she a love of society?” Peter inquired.

“She has a love of her family, and she’s been recently ill—I thought a change of scenery might be beneficial.”

So she’d been ill, then, and recovered—at least enough for them to travel to London, and for her to have been seen walking in Hyde Park that very morning. There had been no reports of her illness, and Peter was almost disappointed at the rumor mill’s efficacy in that regard; Magnus had done an excellent job of keeping the matter under wraps. “You should have told me, Norwood—I might have been able to help.”

“And you might not,” Magnus returned. “I had a physician, and there was little to be done except wait for her to recover. You may be sure she did.”

“I’m glad of it.”

Magnus inclined his head, and they drank together, Peter’s mind buzzing under his calm mask. Magnus had made no confession of his feelings, but it was evident things had progressed since he’d last visited, and although he wasn’t granted a view of them together, he was certain they were more intimate than before. How to broach the conversation, however; that was the issue.

“How goes the brewery, Norwood?” he asked, ducking into another avenue of conversation. “From what you’ve told me, the first batch should be almost ready for distribution, shouldn’t it? I confess I thought you were foolish when you first intended to open the Norwood Brewery back up, but now I see it might have done you some good.”

“You may still think me a fool,” Magnus said, a grim smile on his mouth. “I had word today that the first batch is contaminated. It’s being tested now, but as it stands none can be shipped.”

“My condolences.”

“Most of Evanora’s dowry went into its restoration, and I was hoping it would go a long way to funding the Estate without requiring more from my tenants.” He tossed the whiskey back and made a face as he replaced the tumbler. “When we’re done with town, I’ll return and see what can be done, and if any can be salvaged.”

“Won’t you return earlier?”

“My steward is handling it, and I doubt there’s anything my presence would rectify. Besides, I hardly feel as though I should leave Evanora.”

“She means more to you than this project?” Peter allowed himself a bark of a laugh. “I’m surprised, Norwood—I thought the ale was something you were invested in.”

“One can be invested in two things.”

“So I can see, and it’s plain to see your wife takes a higher place on the stage. It would take an emergency to leave her, I imagine.”

“In an emergency, of course I would have to, although I would hope to make the journey there and back in a day.”

“Of course.” Peter took a sip of his brandy and crossed his legs. “I see you’re quite reformed—am I to see you accompanying your wife to Almack’s tomorrow?”

“Regretfully.”

“If you have a mind to stay home, I would be more than happy to accompany her.”

“I was of the opinion you weren’t fond of Lady Norwood,” Magnus said with another of those sharp glances. He may have been out of the army for a good many years now, but he’d taken the military with him into civilian living; there was a coarseness, directness, to his manner. Peter didn’t mind it overmuch, but it reminded him at times of his brother, Norman. His brother who’d never made it back, Magnus in his place doing his best to take over the role of older brother.

“I wasn’t, at first,” Peter said, keeping his tone light. There could no faux pas greater than insulting a man’s wife, particularly when said

man was attached. "I confess, I allowed my opinion of her to be guided by the rumors around her. But upon meeting and getting to know her, I believe her to be a woman of sense and breeding, and in no way deserving of the reputation she's been given."

"You understand, then, why it is imperative she takes her place in society."

"I believe so, but Magnus... do you care for her so much you will inconvenience yourself for her sake?"

Magnus took his time to speak, but his answer was written in his silence, his hesitation, and the look on his face as he placed his glass carefully on the table. "I care for her a great deal. She was forced into a marriage with me because I desired the alliance; it would be remiss of me, therefore, not to afford her every luxury my position can offer."

"That speaks of more than fondness."

"She is... dearer to me than I could have conceived upon our marriage."

Peter remembered the marriage well, and his shock when Evanora, in a plain dress that by no means diminished her beauty, had walked down the aisle. He also remembered Magnus' conviction that the marriage would merely be one of convenience.

Still, one ought to make the best of one's situation, and there was no changing Magnus' affection. Perhaps, after all, this was a good thing, and so Peter merely smiled. "She seems worthy of your affection. I hope she returns it."

"I believe she may return some."

"Then we have cause for celebration. May you have every happiness you deserve." With a smile, Magnus leaned forward and clinked his glass against Peter's.

Chapter Seventeen

Evanora had not been to Almack's in around seven years; since

Lord Lore left her at the altar, in fact. At first, Magnus' insistence that she should attend, although the prospect of being present in society after it had treated her so abominably was hardly an appealing one, had confused her. She'd never so much as seen him on a dance floor, and he shown little inclination for gaming.

Still, after seeing her father, where even he had fallen into the trap of believing the worst about Magnus, the reason for their attendance became evident.

"I wonder if I'll have partners tonight," she mused to her reflection—and Johanna, who was engaged in pinning up her hair. "Do you suppose anyone will dance with me?"

Johanna trailed some curls down Evanora's face and stepped back, pleased. "I imagine your husband will dance with you."

"He can't dance *every* dance with me."

"If curiosity doesn't pique interest and give you more partners than you can shake a stick at, your face will do the trick." Johanna squeezed her shoulder. "You look exquisite."

In truth, Evanora was also pleased with the effect of the forest-green silk dress. It dipped daringly low, showing an expanse of white skin and the swell of her breasts, and brought out the green in her eyes. The paleness of her illness had finally been replaced by a becoming flush, and with the soft curls framing her face, she looked as well as she ever had.

“Do you remember that first night at Almack’s?” she asked, sighing at the recollection of her youthful excitement and naïve joy at the idea of being well received everywhere.

“The one where you wore that ivory dress?”

“Oh—I felt like a princess.”

“You looked like one, too, if you don’t mind me saying, though I reckon you’ve outdone yourself tonight.”

Evanora smiled, and she leaned forward and peered at her reflection for the mortifying marks of age. “Oh, at nearly six-and-twenty I can hardly flatter myself I compare well with my eighteen-year-old self, Jo.”

“You were beautiful then, for certain,” Joanna said stubbornly, “but you’re happy now, Evanora, and that shows in your face.”

Happy, she mused. Was she happy? She certainly wasn’t *unhappy*, and that was a pleasant change. There were things she would prefer were different—for one, the horrid rumors that were perpetuating about Magnus and their happiness—but when she reflected on her life at Norwood Castle and the simple joys there, she felt nothing but quiet contentment.

Perhaps that was what it was to be happy. To be content, and to want for nothing except things that could be... if not forgotten, ignored. She wanted to be the object of Magnus’ affections, but she was sure he felt fondly toward her, and she could ignore the fact he wasn’t in love with her in favor of the things she did know—that he desired her. That, she told herself, would be enough.

“Yes,” she said, “I’m happy.”

“Then everything you achieve or don’t achieve tonight is of little matter.” Johanna smiled at Evanora’s reflection. “Forget your agenda, or the game you’re trying to play. Enjoy yourself, and soon they’ll see you’re above such things as petty gossip.”

Enjoy herself. Provided this experience differed from her usual ballroom experience, she would have no problem enjoying herself, and provided Magnus was there to share with her joy, there would be

nothing more to want. And so, determination mingling with anticipation in her breast, she dabbed perfume on her wrists and descended to meet Magnus at the bottom of the stairs.



Magnus could hardly contain his admiration as Evanora descended slowly toward him. The dress clung to her figure in a glimmer of silk, and white gloves covered her arms to her elbows, where the lightly bronzed skin of her arms lay bare. He longed to pull them around his neck, to kiss her reddened lips and flushing cheeks. A string of pearls around her neck matched her dangling earrings, but he hardly knew how to notice those when her neckline dipped alarmingly low.

“My Love,” he said as she approached and held out a single gloved hand for him to kiss, “how do you expect me to keep you to myself tonight when you look so delectable?”

At the tone of his voice on the word *delectable*, she flushed again, and sent him a sideways glance through dancing eyes. “Why, Magnus, I don’t expect you to keep me to yourself tonight.”

“How many other men are you expecting to entertain you?”

“As many as show the inclination, I suppose, although I can’t be certain of my popularity until we arrive.”

“I can,” he said grimly. There would be few disinterested men tonight, and he suspected not even the rumors of her looseness would prove an obstacle to her popularity. “Not only are you a Duchess, you’re also exceptionally beautiful.”

She bit back a smile, pressing her teeth into her bottom lip in a way that made him long to press that full mouth against his, for him to bite her lip and for her to moan from the sensation. Since their interruption yesterday, he hadn’t found a moment to be alone with her, but she’d interrupted his every thought with the same aching tempo.

“A compliment?” she said playfully. “Will wonders never cease?”

“I beg your pardon, Duchess—you are hardly bereft of compliments.”

“My mistake, My Lord Duke.”

Infuriating, enchanting woman. He never knew whether he was heads or tails with her, and such uncertainty in his otherwise humdrum life was proving addictive. “I presume I may have at least two dances?”

“And you must flirt with me *shockingly*.”

He put her hand on his arm and they walked together to where their carriage awaited them. Half past ten; they would arrive late and make an entrance, which was precisely what he’d been trying to avoid. Evanora, however, with her bright smile and insistence on flirting, clearly had her own agenda.

“The rumors, as far as I can make out, are of you mistreating me,” Evanora said, and his suspicions of what she had been doing all day—even absent for dinner—were confirmed. “Why society should care so much for my wellbeing after making every moment a misery for ten years... but never mind that now. You are rumored to be cold and unfeeling, removing me from my family and mistreating me, and I’m, according to the rumors, deeply unhappy.”

He tapped the side of the carriage, and they pulled away. “And are you deeply unhappy, My Love?”

“Of course not,” she said impatiently. “But the best way to combat these rumors is for you to appear fond of me, and for me to appear happy. We must also appear oblivious to everything.”

“And if Lord Lore approaches you?”

“I shall dance with him,” she said, no room for argument in her voice. “I’ve been giving it every consideration, and believe me, I’m tempted to give him the cut direct, but that would, I think, be counterproductive.”

“It would suit my agenda nicely.”

“Even if he is behind everything, he will hardly attempt something at Almack’s.”

Magnus had to acquiesce this point, but he was in no mood to humor

his wife dancing with the man who'd caused her so much ill. There was also the sneaking suspicion that would not be silenced, that Evanora still harbored fondness for him, despite everything. It would not be logical, but love was not logical—and he had little doubt she'd once loved him. Perhaps she still did, for all her protestations to the contrary.

"I wish you would not dance with him," he said.

Hazel eyes, more green than brown in this light, snapped to him, and he was more aware of his scar than he ever had been under their scrutiny. Was she looking at him and finding him wanting? "It shall not be a pleasure," she said, reaching out and squeezing his hand, "but I fancy being seen to harbor resentment will spur the rumors, not stifle them."

There was nothing Magnus could do, faced with a beautiful wife who'd made her own plans that hardly seemed to involve him, but sit back and wait for this travesty of an evening to be over.



Evanora could hardly contain her nerves as they arrived, almost the last in a long line of coaches, and she alighted with Magnus' hand in hers. Dressed in breeches, Hessians, and a navy coat, he was certainly not a dandy, but no one could deny the quiet elegance that emanated from him. The military had made him like that, she decided; it had given him the squared shoulders, the confidence, though when she looked in his eye, she knew it was all a show.

She loved him for it.

There was no time left for talking, so she merely squeezed his arm as they entered the ballroom, and hoped that in time he would find that society was more forgiving and less shallow than either of them suspected. For now, though, there was nothing they could do but put on their best smiles and pretend as though they were having the time of their life. In the carriage, when excitement and anticipation had swallowed her fear, the prospect of enjoyment had seemed entirely more possible. Now, however, when they were surrounded by dowagers sending them askance glances, and young ladies murmuring behind their fans, it was harder to keep her smile from drooping.

“Duchess!” a familiar voice greeted her, and her legs almost buckled in relief as she found the source of that voice: Lord Ripley. Dressed in a waistcoat that had seen better days, or smaller stomachs, he nevertheless wore the same kind smile she’d grown to associate with him. “What a piece of luck, My Dear—I hadn’t expected to see you in town yet.”

“Oh, yes.” Evanora curtsied. “We’ve come for the Season—or at least, for some of it. Town living agrees with me less now, you know. Lord Ripley, please allow me to introduce my husband, the Duke of Norwood.”

“It’s a pleasure,” Lord Ripley said heartily, holding out a hand. Any fear she’d had of him giving Magnus the same disgusted look that so many gave him, melted away. “I must say, I was extremely pleased to hear of your marriage, and even more pleased to see you here looking so well.”

The pointedness of his tone didn’t escape her—though she had at no point expected him to have avoided the rumors entirely—but she merely smiled. “As you can see, I’m enjoying married life.”

“We’re very happy,” Magnus added, a possessive hand hovering on her elbow. As soon as they had a moment, she would have to ask him to remove it and allow her some time to herself. If the rumors were that Magnus was a cold, exacting husband who separated her from her family, she would need to prove he allowed her independence.

“So I can see,” Lord Ripley said. “Ah, I believe a waltz is beginning. Might I suggest you take your places?”

Evanora couldn’t help but smile at Lord Ripley’s distinct lack of subtlety, and her smile only increased as Magnus said, “Would you do me the honor of dancing with me, My Love?”

She looked up at him, at the familiar line of his scar, the icy blue of his eye that warmed whenever she looked at him, and if there had ever been a reason she shouldn’t dance with him, she couldn’t remember it. “It would be my pleasure,” she said, taking his hand and allowing him to lead her onto the dance floor.

She’d first danced the waltz with Lord Lore back when it had first been introduced, and to be held in such a way felt very risqué. She

hadn't danced it with anyone since, and she was extremely glad this moment was for Magnus.

"My," she murmured as the dance began and he rested a hot hand against her waist. The heat soaked into her, and she wondered how her dress could be so very thin and feel as though there was so little separating their skin. "I didn't know you could dance."

"Are you so very surprised?"

"That my husband the recluse is a formidable dancer?" Aware of the glances on them, she lifted her head and let her mouth curve into a smile. "Ought I to have suspected it?"

"My education was rigorous."

"I, for one, am thankful." Following his lead and the subtle guidance of his hands, they swept across the dance floor. His hand splayed across her lower back, the tip of his little finger inching down her spine toward her backside, and she felt every miniscule brush in warmth that washed over her.

"You mentioned you wanted flirtation," he said, leaning down so his face hovered just above hers. "Remind me—I appear to have forgotten—how to go about it."

She swallowed at the sight of his lips, lips she had so recently kissed, inches away from her own. "You ought to look at me as though I'm the only person in the room."

"Be more specific, My Love. Should I look at your eyes..." he stared into her eyes with such intensity her heart stuttered, "or your mouth?"

The music's pulse echoed her thrumming heartbeat, and the breathy, half-finished phrases echoed her thoughts—thoughts that had been scattered by his proximity, and the promise that lay behind his words. When he trained his gaze on her mouth, moreover, she felt heat rise in her cheeks.

"Now I ought to laugh a little," she said, adopting a simpering smile, "and glance away."

His hand tightened on her waist still more, and through the skirts of her dress, she almost wondered if she could feel proof of his arousal. "And now look at me again," he commanded. "Forget about the crowd. Look at me."

Shyly, she raised her gaze to him again. Rather than flirtatious—she'd been the object of Luther's calculated flirtation before, and it had always involved a certain polish. Unlike Magnus, who preferred to be alone, Luther had always been aware of society's eyes, and had sought to show them what they expected to see.

That's what she had been trying to do, too, but when she looked at her husband with that heat burning at the back of his eye, she lost sight of her goal. She lost sight of everything except him.

"There," he said, that hand on the small of her back descending still further. Heat followed its path. "That's better."

If she could have spared a thought for the world around them, she might have blushed at the scandalized stares that creeping hand brought—but she could not spare a thought for anyone except Magnus. Unable to help herself, she glanced down at his mouth as though she could will it closer.

"You should be careful," he murmured, hot breath brushing her lips. "When you look at me like that, I find it very difficult to resist."

"Resist what?"

The hand on her back moved higher, up toward her shoulder blades so her chest pressed against his. "Resist removing your dress here and now."

The thought of it sent shivers down her spine, though she gave an embarrassed laugh. "Here, in front of everyone?"

"As I recall, we had some unfinished business."

"Keep your voice down. Someone might hear."

He moved his mouth to her ear. "Would you prefer I whispered exactly what I want to do to you?"

In his strong arms, his breath tickling her neck, and that wandering hand across her back, it took all her willpower to tap his shoulder with the palm of her hand. “You’re behaving like a rake.”

“I believe if I’m being rakish with my wife, it’s hardly rakish at all.” He leaned back, a smile unfurling in his eye. “Are you telling me you’ve no desire to be doing anything but dancing?”

The music came to a stop, the last chord lingering around them as the other couples untwined. They, too, should move away, but to break this moment seemed criminal; there was nothing she wanted less than to move out of Magnus’ arms, and by the firmness of his hold, it appeared he felt the same.

And oh—that aching need for him. He would never know just how much she wanted him, all of him.

“Evanora Rathbone!”

With a start, Evanora broke away from Magnus and turned in some confusion to see her Aunt Augusta standing behind her, fury written in every wrinkled line of her face.

“How dare you disgrace the family in such a way,” she hissed, rapping Evanora’s knuckles with her fan. “As for you, young man, you should know better than to fraternize with my niece in plain sight.”

“Aunt—”

“I wondered why you had not been waiting on me these last few months, and now I see why. Come, Evanora.”

Beckoning Magnus to follow, Evanora accompanied her aunt to her usual seat by the side of the room. “It seems I have some news for you, Aunt,” she said.

“Are you intent on bringing more shame to the family?”

“Aunt, please allow me the honor of introducing my husband, the Duke of Norwood.”

“Husband?” Her aunt’s small eyes narrowed as she looked at Magnus.

“Don’t tell me you prevailed upon a man to marry you.”

“It was I who prevailed on her,” Magnus said with a slight bow.

“Tosh! Evanora, tell me it’s not true.”

“Why should it not be true, Aunt? We are happily married, and I am now the Duchess of Norwood.”

Aunt Augusta stared at Magnus for a moment. “Norwood, hmm? I see the similarity with your father now, Boy, but that awful scar does you no favors.”

Evanora pressed her lips together. “I would ask you be civil to my husband.”

“Oh, now I see you’re catching all sorts of airs and graces now you’re married. Never mind I stuck by you all those years.” Her aunt sniffed. “Ungrateful girl.”

“I believe I see an acquaintance of mine I must meet,” Magnus said. “Pray excuse us, Lady Rathbone.”

Evanora didn’t bother bowing to her aunt, and instead slipped her arm in Magnus’ arm.

“So that was the infamous aunt,” he said, steering her across the edge of the ballroom. “I’m impressed you put up with her for so many years.”

“When one is a social outcast, one has little choice but to fall on the kindness of one’s family.”

“It hardly strikes me she was kind.”

A smile quivered on the corner of Evanora’s mouth. “I believe she meant to be, in her way. She certainly defended me to anyone who dared insult me in her presence.”

“Did her protection come at too high a cost?”

“What does it matter,” she said, squeezing his arm, “when I no longer

need wait on her. I have a husband to care for now.”

“I anticipate needing much caring,” he said, “but for now, let us meet Sir Robert Blackmoor and his wife.”

Gathering her wits, and placing a smile on her face, she allowed him to lead her through the crowd to a man of middling height. In fact, had she not met him, she might never have noticed him; everything about him was distinctly average, although his gray eyes—rather like a hawk, she thought—were unusually sharp, and his smile was kind.

Beside him, with auburn curls and large blue eyes, was a child of a girl that barely looked as though she’d made it to her first season. If she had to guess, she’d have put the girl at eighteen, though her husband, judging from the lines that flared from his eyes, had to be five-and-thirty at the very least.

“Blackmoor,” Magnus said in affectionate greeting, “may I have the pleasure of introducing my wife, the Duchess of Norwood.”

“Your Grace.” Blackmoor bowed, and although he was nondescript in every meaningful way, she noticed his manners were exquisite. “It’s a pleasure. Allow me to introduce my wife, Lady Abigail Blackmoor.”

Evanora turned her attention and her curtsy on the girl, who smiled prettily. Everything about her was quietly pretty—she didn’t broadcast her beauty, but rather contained it rather as one might contain perfume within a bottle; if it were to be unstopped, everyone around would sense it. “I’ve been so looking forward to meeting you,” she said, with such authority Evanora was surprised. “My husband was so certain we would be friends.”

Evanora glanced at where the two men were in easy conversation. Magnus, perhaps because he was so comfortable with them, had released his hold on her utterly, and did not try to stop her as she moved away from him to converse with Lady Blackmoor.

“I had no idea Sir Robert and the Duke were such good friends,” she said.

“Why, yes,” Lady Blackmoor said with engaging artlessness, “they have been ever since they met in the war.”

For such a young girl, there was a certain poise to her that appealed, and so Evanora invited her with an incline of her head to walk. Arm in arm, Lady Blackmoor's auburn head near Evanora's brown, they proceeded around the edge of the room. "What do you know of their experience in the war?" she asked. "The Duke tells me so very little, you know. I rather think he hated it, but there's something about him —"

"That loved it," Lady Blackmoor finished. "Robert is the same. Sir Blackmoor, I mean." She blushed. "He worked as His Majesty's spy for the longest time. I rather fancy it was about fifteen years, and although he hasn't told me a great deal, I believe he did a great many daring deeds."

I'm sure he did, Evanora thought wryly, glancing back at where he was still engaged in talking to Magnus. Beside Magnus, tall and broad, she wondered how anyone could possibly notice the bland, brown-haired man beside him. Perhaps that's what made it possible for him to be a spy; the ability to blend, to become unnoticeable beside anyone else of note, must have been an asset.

Regardless of what daring deeds he had or had not done, and regardless of how little he stood out in the crowd, it was clear his wife adored him, and Evanora felt the tug of that quiet adoration in her own chest as she looked across at Magnus' strong shoulders and impulsive smile.

"Have you been married long?" she asked the other girl, glancing down and stifling her envy of the auburn curls.

"Oh no! Perhaps—I believe it's three months. He is the best of husbands."

Evanora laughed and squeezed the younger girl's arm. "Only if you allow mine to be the best also."

Lady Blackmoor glanced up, hesitancy written in the line of her brows. "Do you not mind it? His—" With a cautious hand, she gestured to her face where Magnus' scar lay.

"At first I did," Evanora admitted. That first day—and night—his disfigurement had been perhaps the greatest reason she resented the marriage and resented being partnered with a man society had labeled

a beast. Afterward, it had been his coldness, and then, as his coldness had transformed into a warmth that swept her away, her resentment had changed into something entirely different. “Now, I hardly notice. I’m sure it seems odd to you when you look at him now, but if anything I think his scar adds character.”

Lady Blackmoor nodded sagely, though the gesture conflicted so utterly with her youth, Evanora had to bite back a smile. “Love can do anything, can it not?” she said.

Evanora glanced back at Magnus once again, a quiet smile on her lips. “Yes,” she said, “it can.”

Chapter Eighteen

Of everyone here tonight, Luther hadn't anticipated seeing

Evanora. Aside from when she had breezed into her drawing room, effectively interrupting the promising fight brewing between him and the Duke of Norwood, he hadn't seen her since before the wedding; tonight, especially, he was forced to admit how well she looked.

It wasn't merely the shade or style of her dress; both were flattering, but not out of the common way. Her figure was good—had always been good—but no better than lots of other young ladies scattered around the room like jewels in a crown.

No, the thing that made her blaze through the crowd today was the sparkle in her eyes, the natural grace of her head as she turned it, and the effortless charm in her smile. He hadn't seen her smile like that... well, perhaps ever, but certainly not since he'd laid claim to her all those years ago. The thought that Magnus of all people could be the cause of her happiness was—

"Are you enjoying town, Lord Lore?" the girl in his arms stuttered. Everything she said was delivered with such trembling articulation, he could hardly pick out the individual words.

Still, the world was watching for his response to Evanora; he would not let them see that he was watching her. And so he smiled down at the poor girl, with her nervous mouth and indifferent complexion. "Exceedingly," he said. "How are you finding your first season?"

"It is—it is very—" She blinked mud-brown eyes and glanced away, to where her mama watched avidly from the side. "I'm enjoying it exceedingly, Lord Lore."

What a dull creature. "I believe your family is from Kent. Is that

correct?"

"Yes—it's a lovely county, My Lord. You should visit—that is to say." She blushed. "Of course, I'm not being forward."

"Of course not," he agreed blandly. "I should never have thought such a thing."

She swallowed, and he glanced around for Evanora, who strolled along the perimeter of the room with a red-headed girl on her arm. Like the girl before him, whose name he'd already forgotten, she looked young enough to be in her first or second season, which would explain why he didn't recognize her. No matter—it was Evanora with her sweet smile and dangerously flashing eyes that he wanted.

The music finally came to an end, and he bowed over his partner's hand. All very proper, although she flushed to the roots of her hair. Once he'd made Evanora blush like that—but he couldn't be thinking of that now.

"Charmed to make your acquaintance," he said, releasing her with such finality she could do nothing but curtsy and retreat to her mama. And he, conveniently, was close enough to Evanora that he could greet her without appearing to approach her.

Evanora saw him first, and slowed. Perfect.

"Duchess," he said, sweeping into a bow. All eyes were on them as if they were on a stage, but he couldn't be sure which lines Evanora would choose. "How charming to see you here tonight. I wasn't aware your husband had a taste for society."

Evanora, as he'd known she would do, glanced around to find her errant husband, who had yet to notice this interaction. Perfect. "I think you'll find you know neither of us well," she said, masking the venom in her voice with a smile. Oh, in the four months since she'd last been in society, she'd changed; her newfound status had given her poise and confidence he thought he'd stripped from her, and he had to bite back his anger.

As if Evanora had squeezed her arm, the red-headed mouse bobbed a curtsy. "Pray excuse me," she said, "I must return to my husband."

Evanora watched her go with a protective look he'd sometimes seen on her face when she looked at her brother. "I presume," she said, snapping her gaze back to him, "you intend to discredit me as far as you're able."

"On the contrary, My Dear—I merely wondered if you would do me the honor of dancing with me."

A curved eyebrow rose as she assessed him. "I rather thought you had no intention of standing up with me ever again. I recall you made your position *quite* clear."

"You do me a disservice, I assure you."

It was unlike her, he mused, to do open battle with an unflinching gaze and words as her weapons; once, she'd shone that brightly, but time and an unsavory reputation had dimmed that fire. He had not thought he'd missed it. "I recommend you accept my hand." A wintry smile curled his mouth. "You know how people love to talk."

"My husband won't like it," she said, quite at ease in the thought of the Duke's displeasure.

"Are you so under your husband's thumb?"

Another clear gaze shot up at him, but this time there was amusement there, in the green-streaked hazel that had once enchanted him beyond all comprehension, and he gritted his teeth at it. "You'd like to think so, wouldn't you?" The look was followed by a wide smile. "I suppose you hate for me to be happy, My Lord, after everything."

"I can't think what you mean, Your Grace." They readied themselves for the dance, and she placed a gloved hand in his, her fingers curling around his. The fire in the pit of his stomach that time and bitterness had been unable to extinguish climbed up his throat. Destroying her had been the work of a moment, an impulsive gesture he hardly liked to admit to himself he regretted; ensuring that her reputation remained destroyed had been a way of keeping her close and reliant on him. Now, she had broken free of her shackles and of him, and at the thought, he tightened his grip on her.

"You should know that His Grace hates you for what you've done," she continued. "You kept public scorn alive against me for years, and

perhaps that's not a bad thing—it allowed me to marry His Grace, after all, and you were never a Duke—but he will never forgive you for it.”

“Excuse my saying,” he said smoothly, looking down into her upturned face and wondering what she might do if he kissed her right here and now, “but I care little for the opinion of a man I have never respected, and I would take care in what you say, Your Grace. After all, you know the damage a few words can do.”

“I’m no longer afraid of you,” she said simply. “Even if you turn all of society away from me, I will still be happy. The quiet life suits me, My Lord.”

The viciousness in his stomach erupted, and he pulled her closer. “I know you,” he hissed. “You crave validation, and while the quiet life may suit you for now, it won’t forever. Mark my words, Your Grace, you will be sorry if you dare trifle with me.”

“You can’t harm me.”

“Those are bold words for a woman recently married. Do you know what happens after the first rush of affection falls away into companionship, and later, into indifference? The Estate will hardly be enough for you then.”

He’d struck a nerve; her face whitened, and the amusement drained from her eyes. So that was what she was afraid of: losing Magnus. Though part of him raged that such a disfigured man could have claimed her affections so utterly, he now had a chink in her armor; one which, if necessary, he could widen.

“Are you such an expert on marital life, then?” she asked, recovering her composure with a toss of her head.

“Only its strife. But come now, the time for arguing has passed. Can we not start anew as friends?”

Only the presence of the surrounding people, he was sure, prevailed upon her to remain silent and wary as he raised her hand to his lips for a kiss.

Lord Lore had Evanora. The thought, heaving in its black-sailed intensity, sent all other thoughts scudding from Magnus' mind. He had asked her not to dance with him, and yet there she was, stepping out with him, her hand in his, her gaze fixed on his face. They were engaged in conversation, and there was nothing Magnus could do but wait for the dance to end.

He paced like a caged lion along the back wall as Lore took his wife's hand and she laughed at something he said. From this angle, he couldn't see her eyes, but he recognized the way she held her head, the long line of her neck. Composure was written in her every movement, and it was evident she remained aware of her surroundings, and the interest that followed them around the room like moths to a candle.

"Enough," Blackmoor said, catching his arm. "You're behaving like a lovestruck fool."

"So what if I am?"

"Do you think you will achieve anything except confirm the suspicions of your possessiveness? Dance with Lady Blackmoor and focus your attention on her, if you can."

Lady Blackmoor curtsied before him, and he held out his hand without another word. Careful not to crush her hand—she was so much more fragile than Evanora had ever been—he walked her out onto the dance floor.

"You should not fear," the girl said, drawing his gaze back to her; it had already started to wander in search of Evanora. "I believe she has no true interest in Lord Lore."

"And what can a man like me offer in place of Lore?" he said through gritted teeth. "I'm a Duke, yes, but a penniless one, and you can see her wit and her brightness match his charm *quite* perfectly."

"You forget, Your Grace, he has hurt her all these years."

"Is that the antithesis of love?"

"Well." She smiled a little, and he was struck by her beauty once again. Unlike Evanora, who shone so brightly it blinded his gaze to

every other woman's presence, Abigail's beauty was understated, and the sweeter for it. It was clear why a man like Blackmoor might fall for her. "Perhaps not in all cases, but she looks at you the way I look at my dear husband."

"And," he asked, navigating the ballroom to get a clear look at Evanora, "do you love your husband?"

"Why, of course," she said as though it were obvious.

Two things became apparent. The first that he could not see Evanora no matter where he looked. The second, that if Abigail was correct, Evanora may... it was foolish to think it. And yet—

He could not leave the dance with Abigail on his arm without offending both her sensibilities and the sensibilities of everyone watching, and so he smiled down at her. "If you accept my advice, I suggest never entirely letting Blackmoor get his way. He likes a challenge, and if you can continue to challenge him, he'll be a happier man for it—and you a happier wife."

"I rather thought that might be the case," she said serenely. "It goes against everything Mama taught me about men, but I suspect Robert is not like all men."

"He is not indeed, and the better for it."

"Am I to infer, then, that you are also not like all men?"

He allowed himself a smile at the pert, questioning tone in her voice. "I rather think not, Lady Blackmoor. Is this something you intend to pass on to Evanora?"

"I think you ought to tell her that yourself."

The music ended, and he bowed before her. "Pass my congratulations to Blackmoor in his choice of wife. May he strive to deserve you."

She blushed rosily and curtsied, but he had no intention of seeing the effects of his words; he was already on the hunt for Evanora. In the moments since he'd last seen her, she'd contrived to utterly disappear, though Lord Lore was talking with a small group, so she was not at

least with him.

“Holland!” he said, recognizing that fair head immediately. “There you are.”

Peter detached himself from the young lady he was talking with, and she stared after him in high dungeon. Not that she had any right to be offended; at two-and-twenty, Peter was hardly looking to marry.

“Norwood, it’s deuced good to see you. Did I see your wife dancing with Lore?”

“Indeed she was,” Magnus said grimly. “But, you know, I can’t command her every movement; she can do as she pleases.”

“Does it please you she’s got into the card room with a certain Lord Ripley? A rather more elderly gentleman, so I doubt it’s anything untoward—but I couldn’t let you go without telling you.”

For a woman who supposedly had little to no interest in being alone with other men, she was doing a remarkably good job of being alone with several men except him. “Thank you,” he said.

“She’s looking especially fine tonight, Norwood.”

“So she is,” Magnus said, a hint of grimness in his voice, “and it appears I’m not the only one to have noticed.”

“You’re not talking about Lore, are you? Strewth, man, I hardly think he has any interest in her after all these years. He turned her away at the altar.”

“No disinterested man would pay her such attention even now, Holland, surely you know that.”

“You believe him to be pursuing her?”

“Not with any honorable intentions. Pray excuse me—I must find my wife.” Peter made no objection as he strode away in the direction of the card room.



Evanora sipped at the punch in her hand and sat before Lord Ripley. "What an objectionable experience," she remarked. "You know, I once swore I would never dance with that man again."

"You can be perfectly sure I recall the incident perfectly, My Dear."

She glanced across at the smile spreading across his face. "Was I very out of line?"

"I really can't recall," he said gallantly.

"I do believe I was—but rightfully so. He's an odious man, even if His Grace—" She let her voice fade away into nothing. They'd agreed not to speak of her illness, and she had no intention of breaking that promise. "Did you know I was to marry His Grace all those months ago?"

"My lodgings were close to his, and I saw your father's carriage pull up before I left that night. Couldn't think what else he'd be there for." He looked at her with fatherly concern. "Does he treat you well, My Dear?"

"I can't be sure he loves me, but he treats me well—exceedingly well. I hadn't thought he could... we did not get along too well when I first arrived." She laughed. "I thought him abominably rude, and I suspect he considered me pert. But things have changed, and I consider him—if I may be frank, I believe I may be in love with him."

Lord Ripley smiled and glanced behind her. "Is that so?"

"Are you very shocked?"

"I'm not, but I suspect your husband may be." She turned to encounter Magnus standing behind them, staring at her as though she were the only one in the room.

Lord Ripley, although not graced with an excess of handsomeness, had a great deal of social grace, and he offered Magnus an urban smile. "I apologize for monopolizing your bride," he said. "I believe I have an engagement with—" He waved an airy hand. "I hope to see you soon, Your Grace."

“Yes,” she said, though her senses were so in disorder she hardly knew what she was saying. “I do, too.”

Magnus took the seat Lord Ripley had vacated, and then it was just them and the prickling tension that ran up her arms.

“Is it true?” he asked, a rasp in his voice that she knew with a sense that transcended her ears and led straight to her heart. “Can it be so?”

This was not how she’d imagined this conversation. In her head, they would mutually profess their affection, and they would be alone. She would also have planned her declaration; she would have had a moment to choose her words with the care you might touch shattered glass. If she got it wrong—if she exposed her feelings in a way that could never be reciprocated—she would shred her heart the way glass would shred her fingers.

“I have been very fond of you for a long time, Magnus,” she said. “I believe—I believe I would consider it greater than fondness.”

“Lord Lore—”

“Means nothing to me. I have not thought of him as... in that way, for a long time.” Although he sat close enough she could touch him if she wanted, she stilled her hands in her lap and allowed her gaze to drift over his firm lips, now pressed so uncertainly, and the shattered blue of his eye like the sky through a broken window. Shards of color ricocheted across his iris; yellow and green and brown. The more she looked, the further she could see. “I see only you.”

“Then,” he murmured, “why are we still here?”

“The dancing—”

“I have no care for dancing, Evanora. Not now.”

Not when he looked at her with such hunger in his gaze. Perhaps he did not love her—perhaps he would never love her—but this desire would be enough.

Chapter Nineteen

Though it was too early to leave without talk, Evanora cared

little. She sought a few of her acquaintances to say she was leaving—claiming the headache as a reason—and she saw Magnus speak to both Sir Blackmoor and Peter to inform them of their retiring. Neither of them approached Lord Lore.

Magnus pulled her onto his lap as soon as the carriage door closed behind them. She thought distantly that perhaps she ought to protest—although it was dark and they rattled along at a good pace, kissing a man in a carriage seemed a little risqué—but her lips found his as desperately as his found hers. His hands ran down her sides and pulled her closer to him, so her chest pressed against his.

They should stop, but their hot, heavy breath mingled in the cool night air, and she felt as though she were being dragged along on a tidal wave of her own choosing. There could be no stopping this, and the inevitability of it broke a sound from the back of her throat. He nipped her bottom lip, and the pleasure-pain of it sent more of that warmth to that precious place between her legs.

“Touch me,” she gasped, taking his hand and placing it on her breast. If this made her wanton, so be it—she had waited for him too long, and she would not wait any longer. This would be the night. The night they consummated their marriage.

With a growl, he obeyed her request, palming her breast and kissing down her neck, down her chest, to where her dress dipped. “You have no right to be so alluring,” he told her in gravelly accents. “Every man in there wanted you.”

She fisted her hands in his hair as he licked along the upper swell of her cleavage. “You’re exaggerating.”

"I never exaggerate." With a finger and thumb, he touched her nipple, and she gasped. "You didn't notice how every man's eyes followed you."

"And I suppose you did?"

"I always notice how others look at you."

"Maybe you would be better served looking at me yourself."

"If I spent too long looking at you, My Love, I'd have behaved in a way that would have shocked all the dowagers."

She gasped a laugh at the idea as his hand traced down her stomach toward that sweet spot. Even over her dress, her skin was sensitive enough that every touch sent flares of fire across her. "I doubt we'd be allowed in again."

"If you were my compensation, I doubt I'd mind."

His hand wasn't moving fast enough, and she rocked back and forth against him, desperate to feel something more, to encourage the flashes of pleasure she knew now that place between her legs could bring.

"That's right," he growled in approval, nipping her earlobe. As she rolled her hips, she felt again that rod twitch against her.

The carriage came to a stop, and awareness flooded her cheeks with color. She lurched back away from him, but he caught her with gentle hands. "There's no need to worry, My Love. No one can see us here, and it's dark."

"My dress—"

"Is staying right where it is," he said, that rasp in his voice banking the fire that burned in her chest.

The door opened and Magnus left the carriage before turning and sweeping her up into his arms. It felt like it had when she was ill and he had carried her; but then he had been careful and gentle. Now there was intent in his stride, and he held her tight enough against

him that she could press her nose against his neck and kiss the tender skin there.

“Good evening,” he said to the butler as he strode past, heading for the stairs. “Please inform Miss Wallace we won’t be requiring her services tonight.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

Evanora hardly dared look at the butler, but his tone gave nothing away, and as Magnus climbed the stairs, she explored the delicate area behind the shell of his ear.

“Good God, Woman,” he said as he kicked the door to her bedchamber open, “you’re enough to drive a man mad.” She reflected she had little trouble with the idea of driving this particular man mad, but he gave her no time for reflection as he laid her on the bed.

If anyone were to come to the door, she would have no compunction in turning them away, whoever they were; this was the moment she had been waiting so long for, and she would have no one disturb them.

But there was no knock on the door as he ripped her dress from her with no regard for its buttons, and there was no knock on the door as removed her stays, her chemise, and until she was lying on the bed before him, the air cool against her naked body.

“Evanora.” He gazed down at her with a smile so warm it melted whatever insecurities she had left. “Oh, My Love. My Darling.”

She held her breath as he leaned over her and kissed her, darting his tongue in her mouth, and then turning his attention to her ear, her collarbone, across her breasts. The heat of his tongue, the press of his lips, against the chill of the air, made her arch her back against him, urging him on—though to do what she couldn’t exactly know. She wanted his hands between her legs.

His kisses descended, tongue swirling around her belly button, and further, to the jut of her hip bones, until finally his intention became clear, and panic shifted the heat aside. “Magnus, you can’t—”

He looked up from where his head lingered between her legs, and the

sight sent a shaft of light through her. “Don’t you trust me?”

“It’s not a question of trust, Magnus, it’s a question of—” Well, she wasn’t sure precisely what it was a question of, but the idea of his tongue down there—of him *tasting* her—

His eye darkened like a stormy night as he looked at her, the cresting desire crashing over her until she could hardly breathe. “Trust me,” he said again. And she did.

She let him run his hands down her bare legs, and let him spread them. She let him kiss the tender inside of her thighs, and propped herself up on her elbows so she could see his head, wine dark in the candlelight, poised between her legs, right above the place where she throbbed with desperate need.

“Please,” she whispered.

He glanced up at her. “Please what?”

She couldn’t say it—didn’t know how to say it—and so she just whispered “Please” again.

He hesitated just a moment longer, and then he plunged his head down and licked. Fireworks exploded along the path of his tongue as he circled the most sensitive part of her, and then he flicked across it.

At her moan, a low sound of pleasure erupted from his throat, and he gripped her legs, his fingers digging into her thighs, brown against cream. Just as it had before, months ago, the pleasure built and grew, heat sinking down through her to settle right where his tongue moved.

She could live without his love as long as he gave her this; she could live without most things, as long as he made her body come alive like a flame. The pleasure tightened on a string until she teetered on the edge. Magnus looked up, the light dancing across the craggy lines of his face. “Do you love me?” he asked.

She was so close to that glorious release; another nudge and she’d be over. “What?”

“Do you love me?”

If her senses had been less scattered, perhaps she could have thought of a lie, or a way to evade the question, but there was nothing in this chamber except them and the truth that lay between them. And so she nodded. "Yes."

He plunged a finger inside her, all the way inside, the wave of pleasure sending her over the edge, and she fractured. Release swept through her in a wave of heat and she cried out, fisting her hands in the covers and letting her head fall back.

For a moment, she lay there, slowly letting her body remember where it was. The world stilled around her. Limbs heavy, filled with pleasure, she rose to see Magnus staring at her. "What?"

"You're mine," he said simply, raising his hands and opening his shirt. She watched in detached wonder as he stripped, quickly and efficiently, but when he drew down his breeches, she pressed a hand to her mouth at the sight of the member that had been pressing against her. It stood tall and proud, bigger than she could have presumed possible.

Beautiful. She'd seen nothing so beautiful as the man who stood before her now, with such vivid proof of his attraction to her.

"Evanora," he said, bending over her once again so that his hair-dusted chest pressed against her breasts. At that friction, that tactile touch, her body awakened once more, and she ran her hands along his sides. He shuddered at her touch. "Evanora," he said again, this time close enough that his lips hovered a hair's breadth from hers. "My Love."

"Will it hurt?"

"Just this first time."

She tightened her fingers against his back, holding him against her. This weight was what she needed; it grounded her, reassured her this was real. The last vestiges of heaviness from her release drained away, and that rod, unexpectedly hot, throbbed against her thigh. "I'm ready."

He pressed his lips against hers as he navigated himself at her entrance, and acting wholly on instinct, she gyrated her hips against

him until the tip of him entered her. She froze, her breath caught at the top of her throat, and Magnus groaned against her mouth.

“It’s like you want me to lose control,” he said through gritted teeth. Forearms tensed, jaw clenched, he eased himself further inside her. His back quivered against her hands.

He was big enough that he stretched her, right on the edge of pleasure, veering toward pain but never quite there. Partway in, he stopped. “It’s going to hurt,” he said. “Tell me if you want to stop.”

In answer, she wrapped her legs around him, and a low moan escaped his throat as he pushed further in. Bright pain flashed through her, but pleasure quickly followed, and she dug her fingers into his back, urging him on.

“Are you all right?” he asked, but she just leaned up and kissed him. Their bodies found a matching rhythm, and she no longer tried to muffle the sounds that came from her lips. His breath, sharp and hard, ruffled the hair by her ear, and one hand slid through the lengths of her hair as the other toyed with her breast.

Another release built. She hadn’t known there could be another, but he brushed a place inside her that beckoned that light, that pleasure, faster than ever before.

She arched her back as he slowed and rose above her, muscles bunched in his arms, his shoulders, all the way down his hard stomach. He moved slightly, and the light threatened to explode. She moved her hips up to meet his—just a little more—

“Tell me you love me,” he said, but the command was more of a question, a plea. Haunting, aching vulnerability lay there, like he had offered his soul to her—and her soul hurried to fill that gap. Entwined, encompassed, complete. Only when they were with each other could they ever be whole.

She reached up and touched his face, across the puckered scar that had long since ceased to repulse her, to the eyepatch that he always wore. She slipped her fingers under the material, feeling him tense above her, and tugged it away. His unseeing eye, that scar arcing diagonally across it, stared at her, and she smiled.

"I love you," she told him.

"I've been waiting months for you to say that," he grated, thrusting all the way inside her again and sparking the fuse that triggered that release. As it coursed through her body in pulsing waves, he grunted, his eye on her face as they shared that transcending moment where their souls entwined and touched the sky.

And then it was over, that shocking intimacy replaced by quiet contentment. Limbs tangled, breath mingling, they lay together; he curled his arm around her shoulder, tucking her into his body, and in that quiet moment where the world settled around them and the cool air danced across her sweat-sheened skin, reality's creeping awareness wasn't an unwelcome surprise.

He pressed a kiss to her temple. "Are you all right, My Love?"

She sighed and closed her eyes. "I think I understand now."

"Hmm?"

"I understand why this—why intimacy is so coveted."

"Ah." His voice warmed with amusement. "May I deduce from that you enjoyed it?"

"Passably," she teased.

"Ungrateful woman."

"Odious man." On a laugh, she snuggled closer to him and yawned. "Are you comfortable, Magnus? Only, I think I might fall asleep."

"Then sleep, My Love. I have no desire to move."

She closed her eyes. "I'm glad we left Almack's early," she murmured. "I'm glad I told you."

"Told me what?"

"That I love you."

His arms tightened around her as sleep smothered her in its silken hold, and she almost fancied she heard him murmur, "I love you, too."

Chapter Twenty

Magnus woke to a knock on the door. Evanora, her cheek pressed against the pillow and her eyes still fluttered closed, didn't stir, and he contemplated whether he wanted to risk waking her. They'd woken once in the night, and he'd taken her slowly against the rumpled sheets as she'd whispered his name.

He was not a man prone to excessive drinking, but had he not woken with her in his arms, he might have thought it a drink-fueled dream.

Rat-a-tat-tat. Evidently whoever had come to disturb them had no intentions of letting silence or the early hour of the morning dissuade them.

As carefully as he was able, he slid out from underneath her, and located a robe to sling around himself as he opened the door. "What the deuce is it that requires my presence at such an ungodly hour?" he demanded in a whisper.

The butler, his face impassive, handed him a missive with his name on. "Apologies, Your Grace, but the boy insisted it was urgent and I needed to put this into your hands myself."

Magnus ripped open the letter. "When did this come?"

"Not half an hour ago, Your Grace."

"Urgent indeed," Magnus said as he scanned its contents. "It appears my steward is extremely ill."

"My condolences, Your Grace."

“Yes, well.” He folded the paper in his hands and considered. From the tone of the letter, Williams had fallen ill from trying the ale and they were unsure whether he would survive another night. Until now, Magnus had endeavored to put the beer, and the implications of its contamination, to one side. However, it could no longer be ignored.

“Prepare a horse,” he commanded. “I’ll ride there at once. I anticipate I’ll return later today. The Duchess will remain here.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

Magnus nodded and strode to his bedchamber, in which he found a paper and a pen, and wrote a brief note to Evanora:

My dearest love,

Circumstances have required I return to Norwood Castle, but I shall endeavor to return to your side as soon as possible.

Your loving husband,

Magnus

There were many things left they had yet to discuss—now they had consummated their marriage, the possibility of children could not be denied—but it would have to be saved for his return. Perhaps he would bring her a gift to apologize for his absence; perhaps they would go to Bartholomew Fair together and partake in its illicit delights together. In whatever way he could, he would strive to show her how much he cared for her in a way his father never had for his mother.

In the still-dark hours of the morning, Magnus mounted his horse and trotted down the street before breaking into a gallop as the houses disappeared from sight. Evanora lay asleep in the bedchamber they’d shared, his body heat fading from the sheets, and he prayed she would not wake until he returned. After she had bared her soul to him, he wanted to be the first thing she saw when she woke.

He wanted to be her first thought in the morning, the last thought at night. He wanted to be her everything, and he would endeavor to deserve it.

The sun had fully risen by the time he reached Norwood Castle, the pervasive damp of England's fall smothering the bright colors Evanora had teased from the gardens. Still, now she had transformed its interior with her feminine touch, and since even with her absence he could almost hear her playing the pianoforte, it felt more like home than it ever had when he was a boy.

"Your Grace." Mrs. Clement curtsied before him, trying and failing to smooth away her expression of shock. "I wasn't expecting to see you here so soon. Is Her Grace with you?"

"She remains in town," he said curtly. "I came on behalf of Williams."

"Oh, well, I'm not certain where he is, but if you take a drink in the library, I'll send him along to you."

"What do you mean? I have it on good authority he's ill."

She blinked owlshly. "Since yesterday? Well, I suppose anything's possible, but I had thought him in excellent health when I saw him."

"In excellent health." Magnus framed the word slowly, trying to make sense of them. He fished in his pocket for the letter that had informed him of Williams' illness. "I was under the impression he had tasted the beer and fallen ill yesterday," he said, controlling his voice with effort. "Am I to assume this was false?"

She took the letter from him and scanned it. "I believe it must be, Your Grace. Let me fetch Williams to you, and you can see for yourself."

"Tell me, Mrs. Clement, do you know if the beer was compromised?"

"Oh—I believe it was, Your Grace, although I hardly think it's deadly. Some of the men suffered from aching stomachs, but all are perfectly well today."

"Prepare me a fresh horse," he commanded, striding around to the stables.

Thomas, his groom, blinked at him. "Why, Your Grace, you just got here."

“And I intend to leave again immediately. Make haste! There’s no time to be lost.”

“At once, Your Grace.”

Magnus paced, kicking straw aside. Panic like he’d never known reached a crescendo, and he could hardly think straight as Thomas took an infuriatingly long time to saddle a horse. With every passing second, Evanora was in danger. He’d been a fool.

Her assailant had used letters once before to deceive, and Evanora—sweet, trusting Evanora—had believed them. Now, letters had been used again, and he’d fallen for it like a blighted idiot. He should have known better, and Evanora’s life was on the line because of it. There could be no doubt this had been a ploy to remove him from the scene so he—Lord Lore—could access her more easily.

If anyone had dared harm her, he would rip the city apart stone by stone until he located the culprit, and then they would wish they had never been born.

“The horse is ready—” Magnus took the reins and swung his leg over the saddle. He kicked his heels into the horse’s side and set off at a gallop.

If he pushed the horse, he could make the journey in two hours—especially if he cut across the fields. A horse was not constrained to the roads in the same way a carriage was. Two hours was too long. Faster, he needed to go faster.

He bent over the horse’s neck and urged the poor beast on, counting down the seconds until he arrived home. No matter what he risked, he would protect Evanora. In a solitary life made up only of duty and responsibility, she had been a beam of light. A breath of fresh air. Losing her now would be harder than losing his other eye; harder than gaining his scar had ever been.

If he lost her, he would have lost his reason for living.

He arrived at his house at precisely one o’clock, and he barely stopped to hand his sweat-flecked horse to the stable boy before he burst into the house. “Where is she?” he demanded of the nearest footman. “Where is my wife?”

“I believe she hasn’t yet emerged from her chamber, Your Grace.”

It was possible, but not likely; Evanora was never a late riser, and he had fully expected her to have long since breakfasted. If she were in the house. He plunged up the stairwell, taking them two at a time, until he reached the bedchamber they’d shared. Empty.

The bedsheets had been roughly tossed to the floor, and her dress was still where he had deposited it yesterday. His only comfort, if there could be comfort in a situation such as this, was that her nightgown was similarly missing. If she had been taken, at least she had some vestiges of dignity.

He strode to the bed, where speckles of rust-like blood marked their consummation. There was no clue of her whereabouts, although there was nothing to suggest any great violence had taken place.

The window was open, curtains billowing in the wind. A vase balanced precariously on the dressing table beside the window, presumably knocked by whoever had infiltrated the house, and Magnus hurled it against the wall. It shattered with a crash.

“Your Grace—” the butler said, stopping when he saw the empty room.

“My wife appears to be missing,” Magnus said with icy calm. “Someone infiltrated the house and took her.”

The man’s jaw dropped as he took in the scene, and Magnus’ anger swelled his chest so tightly he felt as though he could barely breathe. His world shrank to just his balding butler, whose jowls wobbled with every twitch of his head.

“How might someone have entered this house?”

“I’m not—I can’t be certain, Your Grace.” The butler’s implacable demeanor had deserted him. “Perhaps—the back door from the stables? The servants’ stairs run directly up to this corridor, and they might have—”

Magnus strode past him. “That will be all.”

The servants' stairs were small and narrow, wooden steps creaking as he descended to the ground floor and to the small door that opened out into the stables. If someone had entered through this door, they could easily have avoided being seen, as long as they were lucky enough not to encounter any of the servants.

It was time to pay a visit to the man behind this, and establish where Lore had taken Evanora. And, for once, Magnus wouldn't hold back. He allowed himself a grim smile at the prospect. If Lore had considered Magnus a man who would fear the hand of the law, or who would work within the confines of society, he would find himself mistaken. Magnus had been to war; when it came to pitching his own battles, all gloves were off.

Lore's house, all three stories of it with those Georgian pillars along the front and its excess of windows, was as ostentatious as Lore himself. When the footman attempted to insist Magnus introduce himself, Magnus strode on past. The breakfast room was tall and luxurious, and sitting in a red, Chinese robe, was Lore himself.

"What an unexpected pleasure," Lore said, buttering a slice of toast. "Do join me for breakfast. You rather look as though you need it."

Belatedly, Magnus realized he hadn't eaten, but he shrugged it aside. "Where is she?"

Lore glanced at the two footmen by the door and nodded. The two men silently left, no doubt so they could conduct their business without the servants knowing—or perhaps because he was concerned they might give something away.

"About whom are you referring?" Lore asked, though having dismissed his servants, the question was largely redundant; Magnus knew he knew they were discussing Evanora.

"Don't waste my time," he said.

"I assure you, I'm at a loss to know precisely what you want from me."

"Where is she?"

"I really suggest you sit down and take some breakf—"

“Where is she?” Magnus roared, slamming his hand on the table. The dishes jumped and clinked together. “Where is my wife?”

Lore stared at Magnus with infuriating calm. “I find it odd that you believe I have intimate knowledge of the matter. How should I know where *your* wife is?”

The delicate inflection on *your* spurred Magnus into action, and he strode toward Lore, grasping the surprised man by the collar of his robe and hoisting him from his chair. “I’m in no mood to be trifled with,” he growled. “I know you were behind Evanora’s poisoning, and I know you’ve taken her now. Tell me where, or I promise you, you won’t live to see another day.”

“If you’re calling me out, Your Grace, I would prefer it if you did so in a gentlemanly manner.”

“Oh, I’m not calling you out.” Magnus smiled unpleasantly. “I have no pretensions to your ideas of gentleman-like behavior. If you do not tell me everything, I intend to render you unconscious in this very room, and damn the consequences.”

Lore grabbed Magnus’ arm and attempted to force it from him, but Magnus’ hold was too strong, and Lore swiftly abandoned the endeavor.

“I could call my footmen,” he said.

“You would be unconscious before they had time to arrive.”

Lore’s throat bobbed as he swallowed, but he merely drew his brows together. If this had been a different scenario, and if they had not been sworn enemies, Magnus would have appreciated Lore’s composure.

“I know nothing of Evanora’s poisoning,” he said. “Much less that she has disappeared. Explain the situation.”

“I need explain nothing.”

“Then I fear you will discover nothing.” Lore’s dark gaze bored into Magnus’ icy one. “Unhand me, and I will tell you everything about my

dealings with Evanora. Man to man. Truth for truth. In return, I request you tell me what happened to put you in such a rage.”

Magnus threw Lore back into his seat and drew another chair up for himself. “You have two minutes.”

“How very generous.” Lore gazed at his plate and apparently considered resuming eating, before Magnus’ warning cough dissuaded him. “As you know, Evanora and I have quite a history. I threw her over, as is common knowledge, and I may have... encouraged some rumors about her.”

“I’m already aware of what happened between you.”

“When she married you,” Lore continued as though Magnus hadn’t spoken, “I confess I was a little put out. She gained quite some rank. And so I made it my business to encourage public disfavor toward you both—though toward you especially. However, I’m surprised, given everything, the rumors were as successful as they were.”

“You had no right—”

“Spare me the moralistic lectures, Your Grace. I’m convinced you aren’t as dull and perfect as you give yourself the credit for.”

“I would tread very carefully if I were you.”

Lore raised his eyebrows and tightened his robe around him. “Are you going to throw me against the wall and demonstrate more of your brute strength? I quiver with fear.”

“Not this time.” Magnus rose and looked down at Lore, who, to his credit, allowed himself no sign of fear at Magnus’ physical prowess. Lore was a typical gentleman who occasionally practiced boxing when it suited him. Magnus had fought in a war and worked with his hands—he knew how to fight, how to wound, and how to kill. And Lore knew it. “You’re coming with me.”

“I?” Lore smirked. “I hardly think so.”

Magnus smiled, and Lore’s smirk faded. “I didn’t say I was giving you a choice.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Only for practicality's sake did Magnus allow Lore to dress and summon a horse before accompanying him back to his house. The household, having fully processed Evanora's disappearance, was in uproar, and it took several minutes to listen to the stories of a lifted latch early this morning, distant footsteps, and the groom's account of a figure riding westward into the distance.

No one knew what or who might have taken her, and descriptions of the assailant varied drastically. Eventually, Magnus sent his footmen to the Runners, and sent a boy to Norwood Castle with the news. The more people knew about the kidnapping now, the better. He would not allow for defeat.

Lore, during all of this, remained pale and silent, though whether that was from serious reflection about what could have happened to Evanora, or merely a wish to keep quiet and not incriminate himself, Magnus couldn't be certain.

What was certain, however, was the level of disdain in Lore's eyes whenever Magnus encountered him. He hadn't given Lore any room to negotiate or reconsider, and when Lore had drawn his sword cane after dressing, only for Magnus to counter it with ease, the last vestiges of fight had gone from the man.

"Do you really presume you can follow her?" Lore said as they strode into the stables together. "You have no idea where she's been taken."

"And I assume you will not give me any ideas."

"If I knew, I would—Lord knows I don't want any harm to come to her."

"I'd believe that if you hadn't attempted to assassinate her character at every given moment," Magnus said contemptuously. "You can play the innocent all you like, Lore, but that doesn't mean I have to believe it."

"Kidnapping your wife isn't my style, Norwood."

"He took her west," Magnus said, swinging up onto his horse. Lore, likewise, mounted his after Magnus' hand moved to his pistol. Sensible man. "A short man with a lady thrown over the front of his horse. I hardly think we'll have trouble finding her."

"They could always have removed to a carriage."

Magnus made no answer as he trotted out onto the road and headed west. There was little in this direction, and although he wasn't intimately familiar with London's slums, the majority of them lay toward the east of the city.

No, he decided. Whoever had taken Evanora wouldn't have taken her to a poor man's house, or a cheap tavern. True, not only a gentleman could have got wind of where they were staying, but he had the inkling this was the work of a gentleman. A man for whom a horse, and perhaps even a carriage, were not unreasonable demands. A man whose hatred of Evanora knew no bounds.

He glanced at Lore riding beside him, mouth tight and his brows low. Evanora hadn't considered him capable of physically poisoning her, although he'd poisoned the minds of society. Even though Magnus was confident now of her affection, it was possible her past affection for Lore clouded her judgment. All he knew was that she was gone, and Lore was the only person with the motivation to cause her harm.

There! An earring, its gold glinting in the light. Magnus pulled the horse to one side and examined it in the palm of his hand. It was unmistakably Evanora's; she must have removed them and thrown them out to guide him to her. She'd known he would come, and she was feeding him clues.

Thank the Lord my wife is so clever.

"Come," he said shortly to Lore, whose gaze was also fixed on the earring with both astonishment and amusement.

"I've always considered Evanora one of the more intelligent women of my acquaintance," Lore said.

"Is that why you treated her with such little respect?"

"If you recall, she rejected my advances first, Your Grace. Surely now you've got to know her, you must know how alluring she can be. How tempting."

"If you speak of my wife like that again, you'll regret it."

"Such crude insults," Lore mused. "Is that what you learned in the military?"

"What I learned," Magnus said, slipping the precious earring into his pocket and swinging back onto his horse, "is how to launch a campaign. How to win. How to fight even when you're backed into a corner and emerge victorious. I see the world in odds, Lore, and I see how to overcome them."

"My, was that another threat?"

"You have a silver tongue, but we both know that it would take one shot to end your life."

"And send you into exile."

"If you think I care for such things, you're mistaken."

Lore glanced across at him. "I don't suppose you *do* care for such things, but Her Grace cares deeply for her family. Why uproot her without just cause?"

"Don't pretend as though you've got her best interests at heart."

"You wound me," Lore murmured, but his gaze was sharp as it rested on Magnus' face, and then away. "Tell me, what happens when you discover I wasn't behind this?"

Magnus didn't even give the thought a consideration as he scanned the ground for further clues. "I doubt I'll have the opportunity to decide."

They rode in silence for around thirty minutes. Magnus didn't dare to leave this road; it was the largest one out of London in this direction, and he had a sneaking suspicion whoever had captured Evanora was taking her out of the city.

Eventually, the day already beginning to darken, they reached a crossroads, and Magnus pulled up his horse. "We should return," Lore said. "Begin the search afresh tomorrow, when we have the light to see by."

"I have no intention of leaving now, and neither will you."

"Really, what use is it when—"

Magnus bent and scooped another earring from the verge. Evanora must have dropped it here to show in which direction she was being taken. Clever girl. "We continue," he said to Lore, whose shoulders slumped in resignation.

As the sun continued to set, and dusk fell, darkness from the trees and hedges pooled across the road in inky shadows, and it became increasingly difficult to see. However, as they approached a small dirt path, Magnus caught sight of a scarf draped across a tree branch.

"Are you quite sure?" Lore asked, reining in his tired horse. "This is hardly a road."

"See here?" Magnus indicated the wheel marks in the mud. "They took her this way."

"I hardly know what madman would venture a carriage down this track," Lore said, peering between the trees. "I have no confidence it will remain at this width."

"We should continue on foot."

To his surprise, Lore made no more demur as he dismounted and wrapped the reins around a convenient branch. Still, it was no business of his whether Lore came willingly or reluctantly, and so he continued through the wood. Under the trees, even the last vestiges of light had faded, but Magnus' senses were on high alert. The military had ensured he knew how to track and how to absorb the world through all his senses. There was nothing unusual in the air, no

unexpected scent, and the wood was alive with the sound of rustling undergrowth.

And still, slicking his fingers through the mud to let his hands follow the carriage markings even when his eye couldn't, he followed the path left for them.

The further they went, the more the air temperature dropped, until Magnus' fingers were numb. His boots would no doubt be ruined, although the only person who might really mind was Rogers, his valet, whose only source of pride in this world seemed to be Magnus' appearance—a very unfortunate source of pride it was, too, as Magnus rarely cared for his appearance. Or the state of his boots.

Contrary to Lore's expectations, the path didn't narrow. It remained at width, although Magnus estimated the foliage on either side would have scraped down a carriage's sides. A terrifying experience for Evanora, who would have been able to see little.

Rage, unlike any he'd ever known, unfurled in his gut. If they had done anything to harm her, anything to so much as touch the hair on her head, he would— They finally reached the woodland and came to a familiar series of buildings. A plain carriage lingered outside, horses snorting and pawing at the ground.

"My brewery," he murmured.

"And yet you have the temerity to continue to accuse me," Lore said.

"All evidence points to you."

"Besides the fact I didn't know you were endeavoring to resurrect your father's ale." Lore shuffled impatiently beside him. "What are you planning?"

Magnus peered at the buildings. Most were dark, as they would be this time of night—he had no way to tell the time, but the working day had long since finished, and possibly had done so since Evanora and her kidnapper had arrived—but there was a single, flickering light in his office. Placing his feet carefully, he crept toward the door, motioning Lore to keep with him. The other man wasn't nearly as proficient at walking silently, something Magnus hadn't fully appreciated until the moment silence was of the essence.

Pausing by the corner of the building, he put a hand on his pistol and considered his options. His eye had adjusted to the dark, and although there was only a crescent moon, often concealed by gauzy clouds, it gave enough faint light for him to see by. Aside from the horses, which he gave a wide berth, there was no other movement.

Good. The fewer assailants there were, the fewer he'd have to fight. Lore, if he wasn't actively fighting against him, would likely prove only a hindrance. As they approached the office door, a quiet voice sounded, and he strained his ears to hear. A male voice, rumbling low, and then silence in the space a response would usually fill.

The fear that gripped him quickly dissipated. Even if Evanora was remaining silent, he could presume it was a conscious choice if the man was expecting an answer.

He grabbed Lore's arm and thrust him in front, nodding at the door. Lore shook his head, but Magnus was not in the mood to barter or argue; if the man inside was Lore's accomplice, he would not risk shooting Lore. There could be no such reliance if he went first. With one final disgusted look, Lore braced his shoulders and flung open the door.

The light blinded Magnus, but he could immediately discern two things. Evanora, her cheeks dirtied and her nightgown disheveled, sat tied to a chair in the middle of the room. She looked up at their arrival, and relief, marked in her quivering mouth and the tears that started in her eyes, crossed her face.

The second thing he noticed was the single man behind the desk. Peter Holland. His friend Peter Holland, who held a pistol trained on Evanora.

"Ah, Norwood," Peter said. "Welcome. I did hope you'd join us."

Careful not to move too quickly, he positioned himself between Peter and Evanora, his body a shield.

"Holland," he said blankly, "what's going on?"

"I think you know."

It couldn't be real. Magnus had *trusted* Peter, had welcomed him into

his life as his friend—as the younger brother he never had. If he'd had to bet, he would have bet his life Peter wasn't involved.

And he would have bet wrong.

If they'd been alone, he might have taken a moment to process his shock, but as it was, all he could do was widen his stance and hold up his hands. "Put the gun down," he said.

"Brave words, Norwood, for a man that allows others to die in your place." Instead of lowering the weapon, Peter trained it on his chest. Somewhere behind him, Lore stood by the door, and Magnus half expected him to leave. "Did you really think there would be no consequences?"

"He's here on behalf of his brother, Magnus," Evanora said, her voice remarkably calm. "Norman, I think his name was."

"My brother Norman, who died instead of you," Peter snarled.

Magnus' mind swirled with thoughts and plans and ideas, each of which he discounted. He could hardly believe that Peter Holland—the man he'd treated as his younger brother for the past six years—could harbor such hatred toward him.

"I tried," he said. "I tried to save him."

"You didn't try hard enough! You let him die."

"We loved each other as brothers. He sacrificed his life for me, as I would have done for him."

"But you didn't."

"Holland, listen—"

"No, you listen. I hold the gun now, as you can see." In the flickering light of the candle under him, his grin appeared to stretch too far up his face. The whites of his eyes gleamed. "For once, Norwood, you will be forced to listen to someone else."

Lore still hadn't left. Though Magnus had fixed his gaze unwaveringly

on Peter, his other senses were trained on Lore and Evanora, and Lore still lingered in the back of the room.

“All right,” Magnus said slowly, “I’m listening.”

“My brother worshipped you. He gave his life to save you. And how did you repay it? By hiding away from society and *wasting* the life he granted you. Do you know how painful it has been to sit and watch you achieve nothing while my brother is *dead*?”

Peter’s blond hair, usually so carefully styled, fell limply across his forehead. Magnus heard Evanora move, and he shifted his weight to distract from it. “You may think I’ve been doing nothing—”

“I wasn’t finished.” Magnus kept moving, fidgeting, keeping Peter’s eyes on him at all times. Lore moved from the far wall.

“Originally, I was going to ruin you. The ale seemed a good idea. Destroy everything you ever tried to succeed in, to feel as though nothing you ever did went right.” His gaze shifted to Evanora, who froze. “And then I met your lovely wife.”

With effort, Magnus resisted drawing his pistol and shooting Peter where he stood. “You poisoned her.”

“Oh, yes. You see, after spending some time here with the two of you, I was able to see a few things. First, that despite your intentions, and claims to the contrary, you were falling in love with her. An inconvenient truth, or so I thought, but then I realized... the best way to strike at you was to take the one thing you loved away. Just like you did to me.”

“There’s one thing you never explained,” Evanora said. Just as before, she sounded perfectly composed, as though this were a drawing room conversation. Magnus’ heart swelled at the sound of it. “How did you know to send me a gift of tea leaves?”

“I befriended your brother. Charles. Sweet boy. Very fond of his sister. After I discovered your love of tea, my plan was set. Everything that I placed in there could be found at your Estate, Norwood, thus throwing you off the scent.”

“You were never a suspect,” Magnus growled.

“Was I not? I’m flattered.” Peter swung his attention toward Lore, who’d made his way along the wall. “Of course, perhaps that’s because there was already a villain on the scene. It was so very easy.”

“Lord Lore wasn’t involved?”

“Well, if you’re wondering if Lord Lore did his best to spread rumors about your suitability as a husband, then yes. That’s quite right.”

“I admitted it,” Lore said. “His Grace knows the whole.”

“But my work began long before then,” Peter said with another of those manic grins. “I was the one who spread rumors about you when you came back from the war. Given your self-imposed exile, you could hardly counter them, and your father was so universally disliked, few had problems believing them.”

Only thoughts for Evanora’s safety kept him from diving at Peter’s smug grin. “All these years it was you?”

“And of course, when Lore was so obliging as to besmirch your reputation further, I fanned the flames. I encouraged the rumors, added body to them—after all, Norwood, we’re friends, and if I can’t deny the rumors, if I let the occasional thing slip by accident, it must be true.”

“I wondered how the rumors took so easily,” Lore murmured.

“You should have contacted me, Lord Lore. Between us, we might have ruined Magnus forever.”

“I trusted you,” Magnus said.

“An error, don’t you think, to trust the wronged brother of a friend you killed?”

“An error of judgment, certainly,” Magnus said. He cast his attention around the room, but it was as bare as he’d chosen to keep it. Evanora was on the one chair, and Peter was protected in part behind the desk. There were no other weapons save the pistol in his belt, but he didn’t dare draw it for fear Peter would shoot at the motion.

If they were alone, Peter would have no chance, but Magnus had to consider Evanora's safety as well as his own, and as long as he stood in front of her, Peter could not harm her.

"Tell me about the ale," he said to keep Peter talking. "I presume your trip to the country you mentioned was a trip to my Estate?"

"I spent a little time at my Estate, so if necessary my family would corroborate I was there, but yes, I contaminated the ale. It had dual purpose—of course, it was ruining your latest endeavor, but it also allowed me to set up this entire scenario very nicely."

"You sent the note telling me Williams was ill."

"Your trusted steward requesting your presence on his deathbed—I knew you couldn't refuse."

Evanora began moving behind Magnus again, and he shifted his weight. Lore crept along the wall, closer to them. "Were you watching the house to see me leave?"

"I thought it would look a little suspicious, so I hired a pageboy to deliver the note and watch you leave."

"Very clever," Magnus said.

"Yes," Peter agreed, "it was, rather. But you never thought I might be capable of such things." Evanora's fidgeting became more pronounced, and then suddenly stopped.

"I was wrong," Magnus said, to cover for her and draw Peter's attention back to himself. "How did you take her?"

"Oh, that was easy enough. When I visited before, I got a glimpse of that back entrance, and I visited it in the middle of the night to ensure it was accessible, and when you left, I merely entered, walked upstairs, and surprised your lady wife."

"Did he hurt you, My Love?" Magnus asked, his voice tight.

"Only my pride," Evanora said ruefully.

“The damn girl led you straight to me,” Peter said, a note of anger in his voice. “I came upon her when she was dressing, and the damn girl tossed earrings and scarves from the window. I’d rather hoped to keep you in suspense a little longer. The suspense is the worst part.”

Magnus couldn’t argue with that, but he didn’t feel the need to as slim fingers fumbled around his belt, drawing his pistol. He widened his legs slightly to conceal the movement and spread his hands.

“So now you have me here,” he said. “What more do you intend to do?”

Peter raised the gun. “To shoot you, of course.”

Evanora bit back her fear as she raised the gun. Magnus stood aside to reveal her free hand and the pistol that pointed unwaveringly at Peter. For a moment, his eyes widened, and then he laughed.

“Oh, she’s bold, I’ll give you that,” he said. “I can see why you married her.”

Evanora didn’t miss the glance Magnus sent her, and the dangerous look in his eye. Peter didn’t know her husband like she did—he couldn’t have done, or he wouldn’t have baited Magnus quite the way he did. There was only so much self-control any man could have, and her heart reacted to the rage on Magnus’ face. Deep, murderous rage; rage that made her shiver and clasp the pistol more firmly.

Her palms sweated. Bravery was easy when there was no choice, but she’d never fired a gun before, and judging from the way Peter looked at her, he knew it.

“Enough,” he said, his chest rapidly rising and falling. Sweat beaded on his top lip. “One squeeze, and I can end your precious wife’s life.”

On her other side, Luther crept forward, disguised by the shadows and almost forgotten by Peter, whose attention was fixed on the man like a mountain beside her.

“You know what will happen if you shoot at my wife,” Magnus said, that low, throbbing danger in his voice once again.

“I’ll shoot you too. Remember, your wife holds the gun.”

“So I do,” Evanora said, and pulled the trigger.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The barrel of the pistol erupted with a spark, smoke, and a kick that threw Evanora backward. She'd freed one hand, but the rest of her body was still tied to the chair, and it toppled over so she was facing the roof. Another gunshot resounded, the smell of gunpowder stinging her nose, and a roar of rage shook the rafters.

Her fingers trembling, Evanora discarded the pistol and turned her attention to untying herself. Luckily for her, Peter had not trained in the navy, or the job would have been much more troublesome; as it was, she freed herself quickly and snatched the gun from the cracked stone of the floor.

Behind the desk, Magnus had Peter in an armlock, shoving the blond head against the desk. Peter's gun was now in Magnus' hand, and the wall was pockmarked from the second shot, which evidently missed. Luther, his face pale, ran his hands down himself.

"Did I hit him?" she asked. It was the first question that came to mind.

"Only his shoulder, My Love," Magnus said. "An excellent shot, I must say."

Peter struggled under Magnus' hold. "Unhand me and fight me like a man!"

"Very well." Magnus kicked Peter's pistol to one side, and Evanora picked it up. She now had two guns in her hands—two guns she knew very little about, except the trigger was the object you had to pull to fire it. Still, she held them gingerly, as though a wrong move might cause one to go off unexpectedly.

Magnus stepped away from Peter, and the younger man lay against the desk for a moment, his hands splayed in front of him. They clenched once, twice, and then he pushed himself off and aimed a punch at Magnus. Evanora gasped, but there was nothing to be afraid of; Magnus merely blocked the blow with his forearm and followed with a blow that floored the man.

"I have a sword cane," offered Luther, but Magnus shook his head, breathing heavily as Peter crumpled to the floor.

"I have no use for such base forms of attack," he said.

The cold had long since settled into her bones—being here all day in nothing but a nightgown, with bare feet on a cold stone floor, had stripped every last bit of heat from her. She was standing, but her legs buckled, and the floor twisted up to meet her.

"Evanora." Magnus caught her and pulled her into his warm chest. "My Love, My Darling, are you all right?"

"What shall we do with Holland?" Luther asked.

"Let the law take him," Magnus said, pressing kiss after kiss against her hair, her temples, her cheeks. "I have no further wish to look at him."

Magnus' warmth soaked into her like a hot bath, and she sighed with the feeling of it. "I was certain you'd come for me," she said.

"I wouldn't have done anything else."

"But why did you bring Luther?"

"As to that"—Magnus sent Luther a kindling glance—"I thought he might have something to do with your disappearance."

"Oh!" Evanora glanced across at Luther, who, in the process of assisting in this adventure, had lost almost all of his legendary composure and urbanity. His coat was dirty, his hair disheveled, and he looked as though he hardly knew what to do with himself. "You know, for all his threats, I believe he's rather harmless, Magnus."

"I'm coming to that conclusion, too." Her husband scooped her into his arms and turned his attention to Luther. "Once we have come out the other side of this, Lore, I do not want to see you near my wife again."

"I merely defeated my political opponent," Luther said, but Evanora twisted to fix him in her gaze.

"You consistently tried to degrade me and make the object of scorn and derision," she said. "You used me for your own gain, and then when I found happiness, you did your best to turn society against me again. I've suffered enough at your hands."

His dark gaze was unfathomable. "Perhaps some of my behavior can be attributed to regret, Evanora, that I was so rash when I was younger."

"That's not love," Magnus answered for her. "Love is unselfish and kind, and you are neither of those things."

Once, she might have feared that Magnus was so outspoken, but she no longer considered Luther a worthy opponent. If he indeed did regret the way he'd treated her—or the fact they'd failed to marry—his actions since had proved him to be the very opposite of Magnus.

And she loved Magnus.

"Prepare the carriage and the horses," Magnus said. "We shall depart at once."

As soon as Luther left the small room, Magnus caught her mouth in a desperate kiss. She returned it, soaking in his warmth, his secureness—the fact he was here and not dead, not harmed, and he'd come after her. After everything she'd endured, they were together, and this humming bond between them, like two ends of string tugged taut, was enough to prove they would be together, always.

His kissing slowed, and she tasted something salty on his lips. When she leaned back, she saw tears in his eye.

"It's not your fault," she said softly. "Let Peter take the blame, not you."

"If he hadn't been trying to hurt me—" He shook his head and brushed a thumb across her cheek. "I almost lost you."

"I'm all right, Magnus. He didn't harm me."

"I love you, Evanora." He said it as though the words burst from him, and as though he couldn't help himself, he kissed her again. Softer this time, as though she were made from glass and couldn't be broken. Reverent, gentle, and so hauntingly tender that it brought tears to her eyes. "I love you," he said against her mouth. "I love you."

"Oh, Magnus." She pressed her forehead against his as tears dripped down her cheeks. "I love you, too. You know I do."

"I've known for a while, but I was a fool. Too scared of admitting it, too scared of loving someone as precious as you. Can you forgive me?"

She traced the track of tears down his face, rubbing them away with her fingers. "There's nothing to forgive."

"There's a lot to forgive," he said on a laugh. "But I shall strive every day to be a better husband."

"And I a better wife."

"You're already the perfect wife." He kissed her again, slow and deep. "Do you mind if I leave you in the carriage while Lore and I see to Peter?"

Peter! In the bliss of the moment, Evanora had forgotten that Peter lay unconscious on the floor behind them. "What an inauspicious place for you to declare your love to me," she teased. "And what shall happen to Peter?"

"I've already reported you missing to the Runners, and it'll be the work of the moment to have him arrested," he said. "He shall go to gaol for this, My Love, I promise you."

Evanora couldn't hold back a pang of pity. Though everything he had done was deeply, deeply wrong, he'd been hurting. And though she shouldn't have felt such sorrow for him, he was so young to have

become so twisted.

“Do what you must,” she said. “There’s nothing to fear in the dark.”

Magnus strode out into the night, and she shivered—though it had hardly been warm in the office, the candles had given out some heat, and the walls had at least stopped the wind.

“Here,” Magnus said, after depositing her in the carriage as though she were some delicate china. He handed her his coat. “It’s warm, at least.”

Luther, standing outside the carriage door, glanced between them, but said nothing as Magnus beckoned him back inside the office to deal with Peter.

Hunched in the corner of the carriage, bundled in Magnus’ coat that still held vestiges of his warmth, it didn’t take Evanora long to fall asleep.



After some deliberation, Magnus trussed Peter like a turkey, tied the horses to the carriage and took him back to Norwood Castle, where a group of footmen transferred the now-waking Peter to the drawing room. Magnus carried his sleeping wife upstairs to his bedchamber—they would share his chamber from now on.

She didn’t wake as he laid her reverently on the bed, and he stroked her hair tangled across the sheets. He loved her. Loved his wife with a fierceness and a protectiveness he’d never before experienced. She may not have physically been harmed this time—though he took issue with the temperature and the icy nature of her skin after he’d taken her into his arms—but Peter had tried to kill her with the tea. He’d tried to kill her.

If he hadn’t been mindful of Lore’s words on their way to the brewery—that Evanora would not want to be removed so far from his family—he would have killed Peter with his bare hands. As it was, he had to restrain himself, to allow justice to impose a fitting punishment.

Once, long ago, he would not have thought twice about administering his own form of judgment. When he had spent years killing, another

life hardly seemed to make a difference. But that was before he had met Evanora; she had softened him, rounded off his edges, and likely made him much more palatable to be around.

He could never repay her for the honor of loving him as she did, despite his flaws, but he would never stop doing his best to make up for it.

Mrs. Clement hovered in the doorway, and he beckoned her in. “She’s all right,” he said. “She’ll be a little tired after her ordeal, and I recommend perhaps a hot stone to keep her temperature up, but there’s no need for concern.”

“Oh, Your Grace, I’ve been that worried,” she said, tugging at her sleeves. Her eyes were red-rimmed. “After we heard someone had taken her—and after the incident with the tea...” she sniffed, “I just thank the Lord you found her safely.”

“Send for her lady’s maid in London at once.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

“And now,” he said, his tone darkening, “it’s time to deal with the blaggard downstairs.”

Two footmen and Lore surrounded Peter in the drawing room; they’d drawn up a stool for the man to be tied to, and a deafening silence had fallen between them that was only broken when Magnus entered the room.

“So,” Peter said with a leer, “I presume you think you can do what you like with me now.”

“I intend to keep you here until an officer of the law can collect you and take you to Newgate,” Magnus said. “Attempted murder, destruction of property, and kidnapping. I can’t say I expect you to get off lightly.”

Peter struggled, flinging his head back as he fought against the bindings. Veins in his neck bulged. “You should kill me. I tried to murder your wife.”

“Why should I allow you the pleasure of being held accountable for murder?”

“Because wouldn’t my death be the best revenge?”

“Your suffering will exact me more satisfaction,” Magnus said. “And I intend to see it through fully, I assure you.”

“You’ve changed, Norwood.”

“Only for the better.” He glanced at one of the footmen. “James, have you sent for the local Magistrate?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

He smiled at Peter, who was bucking like a mad bull. “In which case, there is nothing more to do but wait. Lore, I have no further wish to see you in my house.”

Lord Lore bowed. “Is there anything I can do to make up for... this unfortunate situation?”

“Remove yourself from my presence, and if you ever feel the need to spread untrue rumors about myself or my wife again, quell it.”

Lore bowed remarkably meekly. “I understand. Goodbye, Your Grace.”

Magnus didn’t bother saying goodbye as he watched Lore stride away, out of his life and to never return.

Epilogue

Evanora surveyed the invitation cards that were laid out before

them. Although they were in the same London house as before—having refused her father’s generous offer to have them stay with him—their experience was markedly different. She couldn’t be certain that Luther had done anything, but since Peter’s plot had been revealed and he’d been sent to gaol, it couldn’t be denied they had more invitations than she knew what to do with. Even Lady Jersey had sent one—the same Lady Jersey who had revoked her voucher when the news of her scandal had emerged almost seven years ago.

“I presume we can’t just inform all of them we’re busy,” Magnus said, eyeing the scattered cards with a mistrustful eye.

“After their generosity, it would be extremely ungrateful.”

He crossed a long leg and looked at her with that one eye of his, a soft smile on his face. “Are you so willing to forgive their transgressions?”

“Believing rumors is hardly a transgression punishable by death. Besides, you know why they believed Lord Lore.”

“I hardly see why. There’s an insincerity about him that’s impossible to like.”

“That’s because you’re irrepressibly honest,” she said, biting her lip to prevent her answering smile from spreading across her face. “You should know as well as I do that he was extremely well received in society—better than I ever was. He had a way of charming people.”

“Including you.”

“Including me,” she agreed, ignoring the slightly jealous note in his voice. “Back when I was young and impressionable, and good looks along with excellent manners were the only thing that mattered to me.”

Magnus raised his eyebrows. “Why, are you to say they don’t matter to you now?”

She leaned across the table and kissed him, that smile breaking free against his mouth. “I didn’t marry you for your manners, My Darling.”

“No, you married me for my title,” he pointed out, “and I could hardly have had a more reluctant bride.”

“Nor I a more reticent bridegroom. If we’re to point out flaws, I believe we’ll both have our fair share.”

“No,” he said, pressing her hand against his lips. “You never had any flaws, and you always behaved with perfect grace even when I was downright unwelcoming.”

“Would you allow me to assist with the running of the Estate now?” she asked wickedly. “Or is that still not *necessary*?”

“I’ll share everything with you—except, perhaps, these blasted invitations.” He looked down at the cards with amused exasperation. “I will accept being a member of society for your sake, My Love, but I won’t tolerate being engaged every night.”

She glanced up with a mischievous grin. Although he was doing his best to appear at odds with the world, she knew he was just happy they were being accepted into society again.

“I suppose I shall just have to accept them without you,” she said innocently. “After all, I’m not prepared to insult half the ton merely to appease your love of solitude.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You care too much about what others think of you, My Love.”

“It’s what I was raised to do—but oh, Magnus, isn’t it so much easier being at peace with the world and not fighting against it?”

“It is,” he agreed. “But I want at least one night a week alone with my wife. Is that too much to ask?”

At the look in his eye, she put the cards down—with such a deliberate motion, a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “And what do you want to do with said wife, alone for one night a week?”

“This,” he growled, scooping her out from the chair and shouldering the door open. Once, she might have been embarrassed that the servants would see her in such a position, but in the weeks since they’d first lain together, it had become such a commonplace occurrence she’d put embarrassment to one side. Besides, this was precisely what married men and women ought to be doing—and she would be remiss in her wifely duties if she did anything but cling to his shoulders as he carried her upstairs.

“Now,” he said, tossing her on the bed that they shared every night. “What were you saying?”

“I merely wanted to know what you intended to do with me,” he said, smiling in tingling anticipation as he lowered his body over hers and captured her mouth in a hot kiss.

Her experience in lovemaking had been extensively broadened since that first time, although she still reflected on the new-found thrill that she’d felt then. Every time they made love, she felt the bond between them grow and settle and strengthen. Once, she hadn’t imagined adoring Magnus the way she did now, but the months that had brought them together had also changed her heart more than she’d thought possible, and she wouldn’t change a moment of it.

As was so often the case, their lovemaking was soft and sweet, with gentle kisses, feather-light hands, and an insatiable ache that was only soothed by the rocking of their bodies. That invisible band holding them together tightened until she could almost see it, and when she cried out with that splintering, fracturing pleasure, the stars seemed to smile at her.

And then, when it was over and his fingertips traced patterns on her upper arm, she lay in his arms and counted his heartbeats, treasuring each one because they were hers. His life was hers. And she was his.

“Magnus,” she said, raising her head and meeting his gaze. A smile

curled her mouth. "I love you."

He kissed her deeply, and she savored the taste of him. Savored everything. "I love you, too," he said.

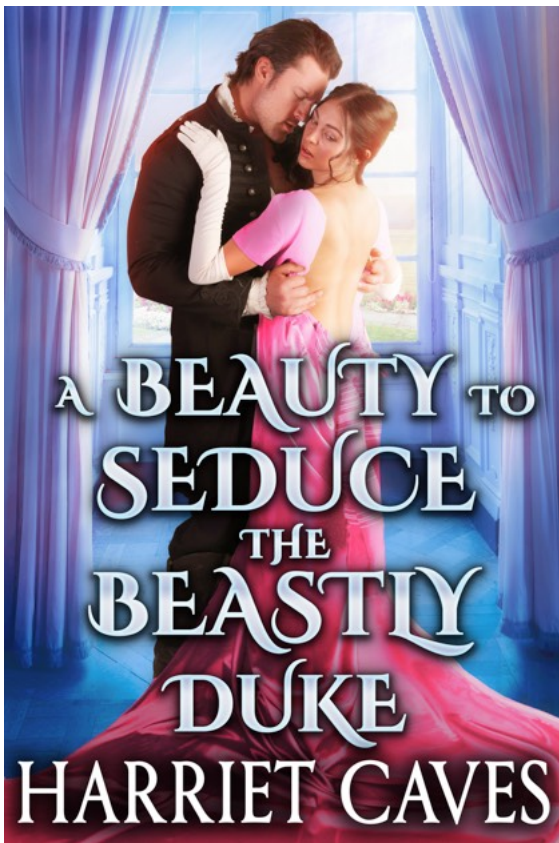
The End?

Extended Epilogue

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Preview: A Wallflower Guide to Seduce a Rake

Chapter One

Crash!

Voices lowered to a hush as over two hundred pairs of eyes gazed at Estelle Astor, daughter of the Baron of Heatherton. Even the tune the orchestra had been playing appeared to have diminished. And there was nothing that quite mortified Estelle like drawing attention to herself.

“Unhand me!” she hissed through clenched teeth, pulling her arm free of Martha Sheridan’s grasp.

Martha’s gaze traveled from the shattered lemonade glass on the floor up to Estelle’s face, her mouth twisted with derision. “Well, isn’t that quaint?” she drawled. “In your clumsiness, you have managed to draw every guest’s attention to yourself.”

Estelle could feel their eyes boring into her skin. And a furtive glance around the room revealed their curiosity, some with indifference, and a handful with blatant disapprobation.

“Did you have to do that, Martha?”

“Do what?” She smoothed her hands over her peach satin dress, feigning innocence.

“You made me drop my lemonade glass!” Estelle hissed.

“I am afraid I don’t know what you are talking about,” Martha said with a toss of her head.

Estelle opened her mouth for further reproach ... or defense but was interrupted by a very familiar, very solicitous voice.

“Oh, poor Estelle!” Devina Fowley sang, taking hold of Estelle’s arm. “What has Martha done to you?” She shot Martha a glare before turning to Estelle. “When I heard the crash, I knew I simply had to come and rescue you.”

“Devina dear, are you not afraid associating with a French harlot might ruin your prospects?” Martha said sotto voce, concealing her words with a lace fan.

“Hush, Martha!” Devina’s tone was reprimanding, which perplexed Estelle, for she’d always been at the fore of the group that called her a French harlot. Why the change in behavior tonight?

“Come, Estelle, let us have a turn around the room.” Devina’s practiced smile raised the warning voice in Estelle’s head.

Together they had attended Mrs. Merriweather's Seminary for Girls for two years prior to their bow into society. These girls found ample diversion in denigrating her.

Devina pulled her away from the refreshment table. Estelle was too mortified to argue. The guests at the ball were gradually returning to their activities. It wouldn’t do to draw their attention back to her.

“Do smile a little, Estelle. Are you not glad of my company?” Devina fluttered her eyes at a gentleman they passed by.

“Oh, how could I not be?” Her voice was as flat as her face was devoid of expression.

She understood, now, her reason for coming to her *rescue*. Humiliating her was a far more interesting game than attempting to catch the eye of every gentleman of fortune in the ballroom.

Devina rolled her eyes, catching her sarcasm. “Did you see my sister, Blanche, waltzing with the Marquess of Campbell? He positively couldn’t take his eyes off her.”

Her stomach lurched at the mention of the marquess, her only friend from childhood. They hadn’t seen each other in years. Estelle had observed the dance in question and wished she had been in Blanche’s shoes.

“I didn’t notice.”

“Of course, you wouldn’t. I suppose you were too occupied with the victuals on the refreshment table.”

They moved to the fringes of the ballroom and Estelle freed herself from Devina's grasp. She, too, appeared to be eager to release her.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Campbell calls upon our house tomorrow. Mama and the Countess of Avington augur a courtship, and I heartily agree.” Devina watched Estelle’s face with narrowed eyes, gauging her reaction. As always, her words were calculated to injure.

Estelle contrived to remain calm, schooling her features into a placid mask. "Good for Blanche."

Blanche might be the least troublesome of the Fowley sisters, but she was still very vicious. None of them deserved Campbell.

Devina inclined her head, ostensibly studying Estelle's face. "I cannot tell if you are jealous or not?"

"And I do not wish to reveal my thoughts to you, Devina."

The girl knew of her feelings for the Marquess of Campbell, regrettably. And if she could undo the events of the past, she would never have written about him in her journal. Casting the confounding book into the fire after the girls had discovered its contents had done nothing to palliate her pain and ignominy.

"You do not need to reveal them to me, for I already know that your feelings have not changed."

Estelle chose to ignore that remark and scanned the room in search of the nearest exit. She'd learned, a long time ago, that removing oneself from venomous company was imperative to one's survival.

"You are sure to find a lot of good in forgetting him, Estelle dear. To him, you are no more important than a pebble on a dirt road. Blanche has been groomed from childhood to become no less than a marchioness."

"And you have been groomed to come second, have you not?" Estelle said, her hands clenching into fists at her sides. The fire within, that she'd been checking all evening, was starting to grow despite the lump in her throat.

Being called unmemorable ought not to have caused her this much grief, but Campbell was involved. Anything that pertained to him made her overly sensitive.

She was no longer going to stand there and take insults. She was not made of weak stuff. "From my point of observation, Blanche appears to be the only one receiving any special regard from the gentlemen present tonight."

"Blanche is older!" Devina defended.

Estelle curved her lips into a sardonic smile. "Yes, and therefore more important. Although I still wonder why she is still on the marriage mart. It *has* been three years."

Devina gaped at her, seemingly at a loss for words.

She tilted her head in a show of grace. "Please excuse me, I have somewhere I need to be. Do enjoy the evening in your sister's shadow."

With that, she gathered her skirts and made for the French doors leading out to the garden. She *had* stood up for herself quite well, she thought. But the injury had already been inflicted and Estelle had taken to bleeding.

"Miss Astor!"

Her eyes shut at the voice calling from behind her, but her pace did not slow.

"Miss Astor!" Mrs. Slater caught up with her. "Are you well?"

The concern in her companion's voice caused her to slow. She was not well but dwelling on her unfortunate encounter with her former schoolmates was not going to do her any good.

Her mother had been indisposed and had insisted she attended the ball with Mrs. Slater, neé Coombes, a kindly widow with a motherly disposition. She had also been her governess from the start of her education until such a time that she went to Mrs. Merriweather's Seminary for Girls.

"Quite well, Mrs. Slater." She came to stand by the stone balustrade, momentarily closing her eyes and breathing in the cool night air.

They stood in companionable silence for what seemed like a long stint; until Mrs. Slater broke it. "Does this garden not remind you of your mother's garden in Kent?"

A wintry smile touched the corners of her mouth. That garden held her fondest childhood memories; where she'd played all day in the summers with Theo. Estelle understood the true meaning of loneliness after he'd left for Eton at the age of fourteen and although he returned for holidays, it still had not felt the same.

She sighed deeply, wishing to not allow him to occupy her thoughts this evening.

"I remember that day you got soaked in the rain with Lord Campbell," she said, and Estelle winced. As beautiful as that memory was, she was not in a state to recall it with pleasantness.

She appreciated Mrs. Slater's attempt to cheer her up, however. "Mrs. Slater ... not now please."

"I understand, miss. The subject of the marquess is seldom an easy

one, is it?"

She shook her head. "No, it is not." Greatly desiring solitude, she sought to gently dismiss her. "Can you check if my father is in the ballroom? We did promise *mama* that we would watch him."

Her father, Baron Heatherton was what one would call a man greatly in want of self-discipline. At every opportunity, he sought to gamble away their fortune; even though there was nearly nothing left. And for this reason, Estelle was required to find a good husband. One wealthy enough to provide for her and pull her family out of the rut in which they found themselves.

"Will you be fine here by yourself?"

"I'm not alone." Estelle waved expansively at the handful of people on the terrace. "I will be all right, I promise."

Mrs. Slater gave her arm a gentle squeeze before she returned inside. She knew she should not venture further into the garden by herself, but she could not help the urge that had overtaken her. Hiking up her skirts as a rush of mischief and rebellion coursed through her, Estelle hurried down the stone steps and into the garden.

Then she collided with something.



"If that man lights any more fire underneath my heels, I would no sooner join the clergy!" Theo tossed a stone into the fountain, curling his lip when it did not go in as he'd aimed it to.

Jameson's laughter echoed in the still night air. "*You?* A clergyman?"

"Do I not look the type?" Theo cast his friend a lazy glance that was accompanied by a lopsided grin.

"Celibacy is not something you are fond of."

"I could still do it," he assured, sitting on the fountain's stone ledge.

"If you believe yourself capable, then who am I to judge you? What has the duke done this time to make you consider the clergy?"

"Mildly put, he wishes for me to retire from my *infantile ways of the rake*." Those had been his father's exact words last night when he'd paid him a visit.

Jameson sat down beside him and rested his elbows on his knees,

allowing his head to tilt in a devil-may-care manner. "It is rather interesting that he should say that. I heard the duke was quite the rake in his day."

"He was worse than a rake from what I've heard." Theo tossed another pebble into the water. He was not ready to give up his life of merriment. He didn't think he would ever be ready.

But his father was pressuring him to marry. Many factors had come together to put Theo off marriage and a betrayal was at the fore. Giving in to his father's wishes was not something he was inclined to do.

The duke would never leave him be if he did not find a solution soon. And Theo's peace of mind was greatly at stake here.

"Your mother, bless her soul, mustn't have had an easy time of reforming him." Jameson touched his shoulder. "Cheer up, Campbell. Marriage does not have to be the prison you're imagining it to be." He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "My grandmother had a bit of a jolly after she'd produced my grandfather an heir, and *she* is a woman. Think what you could do as a man."

His eyes widened at the revelation. "Your grandmother? The same woman that still lavishes us with sweetmeats every time we visit her?"

"The very same one. Sometimes I wonder if it is all the merriment, she allowed herself to enjoy, that is keeping her alive."

"She certainly has outlived your parents," Theo agreed.

A notion began to form in Theo's mind, and the brilliance of it became a salve on his frustration. A wife of convenience! That was it! He *could* sacrifice his pride but still keep his comfort if he found a plain woman that could never tempt him.

The duke shall be off my back, and I won't even have to bed my wife if I don't wish to.

His heart had been wounded once. He would be a veritable fool to allow it to happen again.

"Think about it, Campbell. You shall never be bored a day in your life. Your little wife won't even know what you are up to."

Indeed, he shan't. "Where shall I find a plain bride, Jameson?" he asked, rising to his feet, and tugging at his waistcoat.

That drew a low chuckle from Jameson, who also rose. "You will find that ballroom spilling with them. But why does she have to be plain?"

Theo's jaw clenched. "You know why."

"Right." Jameson cleared his throat. "You danced with one of the eldest of the Fowley girls earlier. She might make you a suitable bride, for she is plain enough."

"Surely you jest!" He turned to regard his friend with an expression he was certain conveyed his incredulity. "The girl is severely lacking in wits."

"Well, you could consider the Lady Arabella Kensington. She has a lovely face amidst other very lovely features, and—"

"Equally without brains."

"I fail to comprehend why this is of any significance, Campbell." Jameson shrugged.

"I might be inclined to find myself a wife to keep my father's sneers at bay, but I have no wish to sire imbeciles. Not if I can help it. And I wish to enjoy a pleasant companionship with her. I am, after all, going to live with her for the rest of my life, thus, making intelligence a quality of great importance."

He clapped Theo on the back. "That is a fine point you just made, my friend. It never occurred to me."

"Of course not. You are not exactly the sharpest of the two of us, are you, Jamie?" Theo grinned devilishly.

"Sadly not. Which is why I ought to steer clear of siring a child, lest it turns out an imbecile." He took the teasing good-naturedly as he always did.

Theo almost thanked his friend for his suggestion but decided against it. Vulnerability was not something he openly showed, however much of it he felt. And his gratitude could easily be mistaken for vulnerability. He will find a bride and free himself of his father's pestering. He was, after all, in possession of a respectable fortune, independent of the duke's. And the man had a limited number of tokens in this bargain.

"Let us once more grace the ballroom with our noble presence and find me a bride."

"Wait until you see them fighting for your attention. There is nothing quite like the sight of gently-bred ladies vying for a handsome and wealthy nobleman's favor."

Theo grinned and tilted his head heavenward. With his attention some

place, he failed to see the figure that emerged into the garden until he collided with it. On instinct, his hands shot out to take hold of it and they met with something impossibly soft.

He blinked into focus and the green eyes that blinked back at him were the answer to all of his problems.

Chapter Two

Estelle squirmed in his grasp, grabbing his hand that had landed on her hip and shoving it away. Just when she thought her evening could not become any more unfavorable, she literally ran into Theodore Hamilton. The very man that had inadvertently placed her in the mood she'd found herself in this evening.

His mouth slanted into a smile as he released her. "Miss Astor." He drew out her name as though he was saying it for the first time. "Certainly not the woman I expected to see this evening but the one I needed."

Her cheeks burned at his words and she stared at his starched cravat, mumbling, "Neither did I."

"It has been a rather long time since we last saw each other, has it not?"

She brushed away a wisp of blonde hair that had escaped her coiffure and looked up at the man in front of her, willing her racing heart to slow and for her composure not to betray her. "It has, Lord Campbell. How do you do?"

He flinched as if struck. "Has our friendship turned so dour that I am merely Lord Campbell to you?"

"Time tends to do that to acquaintances. Even close ones."

A rakish grin split across his handsome face and then his blue gaze swept over her from the top of her head down to her satin shod toes. "Time has, indeed, been kind to you."

Estelle rolled her eyes, feeling as though she'd aged a hundred years despite his words being a compliment.

"Like a delicate flower blooming in spring," he added, and she laughed.

It was very typical of Theo to say something so banal. The look in his eyes, however, as he'd complimented her, squashed every impulse she felt to turn on her heels and run back to the ballroom. He reminded her just then of the Theo of her childhood. Before he'd gone out into the world and changed. Getting accustomed to his distance had been most difficult. But she had persevered.

"How many ladies have you uttered that to, my lord?"

He glowered down at her. "*My lord?* Estelle, this change is wounding me." He pressed his palm to his heart.

Her brows shot up in surprise. "My formality wounds you but not my inference of you giving every lady the same compliment?" She shook her head in exaggerated bemusement.

He shrugged. "The former is unexpected."

"And the latter is not? You truly are the incorrigible rake they say you are."

He gave her a wink that made her insides tumble. "My, my, you are bold. Does your mother know the accusations you dole out to innocent gentlemen?"

Estelle laughed. The ease with which they had slipped into a banter, like old times, was partly responsible for her mirth. "Theodore Piers Hamilton, you would not know innocence if it stared you in the eyes."

He tucked a finger under her chin and tilted her face up. "That was not so difficult, was it?"

"What?" She breathed, suddenly forgetting everything but the vivid blue of his eyes, the sensual curve of his lips, and the masculine scent of him that arrested and paralyzed her senses.

"Addressing me by my Christian name," he said, his voice snapping her attention back to reality.

Estelle pulled away from him on recognizing the danger of losing herself with him this close in proximity to her. But Theo was not ready to let her go just yet because he offered her his arm. When she took it, he began towards the stone steps to the terrace.

"You *have* changed quite a bit, Estelle," he said again, stopping near the French doors of the ballroom.

"If you continue saying that then it risks losing some if not all of its charm." She gave him a cheeky glance. "And yes, I *have* changed. I am no longer the little girl that raced you to the lake, and neither are you

the little boy that took to his heels at the sight of insects."

Theo threw his head back, much to her delight, and laughed uproariously. "Oh, I remember those dreadful times you chased me with dead beetles and grasshoppers, you evil child!"

"I could do that again if you do not behave yourself." She punctuated, and therefore, destroyed any threat her words might have held with a giggle.

Theo laughed again. "I will be duke someday, Estelle. Do you wish to gain my disfavor in such a manner?"

"If you are the same Theo, you have always been, then such actions from me will not cause you to dislike me."

"Ahem!"

Estelle turned around to find a man standing behind them with his hands folded behind his back, and an amused smile on his face. He had the appearance of a man that was conscientiously endeavoring to give the impression that he was a true man of fashion. But Estelle could read people well enough to see right through him. To see that he was compensating for something. Perhaps loneliness, as is often the case.

"Ah, it appears I have been so distracted with our reunion that I have failed to make the proper introductions." Theo turned them around to face the gentleman. "This is my friend, Lord Jameson Lennox, Viscount of Stone." To the gentleman, he said, "And this is Miss Estelle Astor. We have known each other for a *very* long time. Our families' estates share a border in Kent."

"A pleasure, my lord." Estelle curtsied lightly and offered him her hand.

"The pleasure is all mine, Miss Astor." The viscount bent over her hand and placed a courtly kiss on her knuckles. His dark eyes regarded her with unabashed interest, and they continuously darted back and forth between her and Theo.

This discomfited Estelle, somewhat, causing the hairs on the back of her neck to stand on end. She longed to be freed from his company.

Theo took her hand and tucked it in the crook of his elbow before asking her, "Will you give me the next dance, Estelle?"

Grateful, she immediately accepted. "I would be glad to."

He led her into the ballroom and the guests once again turned their

eyes on her. Theodore was a man that commanded attention wherever he went. To be seen on his arm was positive to draw attention to her. And Estelle did not mind it this time. The shock on Martha, Blanche, and Devina's faces brought her more satisfaction than she knew what to do with. If Theo walked away without seeing the dance to completion, she would still be satisfied.

Her breath caught when his hand came around her waist and drew her to him as the first strains of the waltz began.

"Theo?" she whispered.

"Hmm?" He seemed distracted, appearing to be looking at her but not quite.

"I hope you don't mind getting stepped on. I can be a clumsy dancer."

"And here I thought my new boots would see no ruin tonight," he jested, returning his attention to her. "Tell me, what mischief have you gotten in to while we've been apart."

Don't you dare read any meaning into his words, Estelle. His use of 'apart' does not mean you were ever together.

Still, her cheeks heated. "I went to a private seminary when I turned sixteen. *Maman* thought I required polishing. She actually used *polishing*."

He chuckled. "And was that endeavor successful?" He twirled her around with grace.

"I cannot say that my accomplishments have improved."

They laughed together at her joke. Talking to Theo felt as easy as it had been when they were children. And she was starting to get very comfortable in his company.

That was until he pulled her closer. So close her steps nearly faltered. A clumsy couple swept past them and she realized he'd pulled her out of their way to avoid a collision. They twirled towards them again and Theo's hand tightened around her waist. She fixed her eyes on his throat and saw it work as he swallowed. A natural movement, yet it affected her in places she was too embarrassed to admit. And when his fingers brushed her just above the tiny buttons fastening her dress, her eyes fluttered shut for a moment.

"Estelle," he murmured.

She opened her eyes to find his blue ones, dark and unfathomable. There was something in their depths she would believe to be desire if

she allowed her fantasies to run away with her.

"You were telling me of your adventures."

"Right!" Estelle hurriedly recomposed herself. "I wouldn't call it an adventure. I did not travel the world. But I heard you did."

He chuckled. "Who fills your head with such tales about me? First, they tell you I'm a rake, and now I have been traveling."

She lowered her eyes demurely, "You would be surprised how much you are talked about, especially after your return." She changed the subject then. "Did you enjoy your travels, Theo?"

"I did despite the reason I set out on the journey. I learned a lot about people and places."

"What was the reason you left?" Perhaps the truth would make her feel better about his lack of communication all this while.

He twirled her again before answering her question. "My father wishes for me to marry. It was either I traveled the continent or remain here to see him force me down the aisle with a pistol at my back."

Estelle felt her brows furrow as sympathy for him washed over her. His father had never given him the love he deserved. "I see he has not changed."

Theo's mouth twisted. "Not even if hell were to freeze over." His eyes were shuttered but she knew him enough to know his father still had some power over him.

"Tell me more about what I missed."

Either Theo truly was interested in learning what he had missed, or he was seeking diversion. She was inclined to believe the latter.

"There is not a lot to tell except that my father almost completely gambled away our fortune and now I have to marry to save it." The words slipped out without her ever intending them to and she froze.

Theo did not say anything, only watched her in thoughtful silence until the dance was concluded. He secured her arm in his elbow and steered her towards the terrace doors they had earlier come in through.

"That just slipped out ..." she said, her initial embarrassment waning. It was no secret that their family no longer shone in the light they once did. He probably already knew.

"We appear to have problems with a mutual solution, Estelle," he said at length.

She frowned, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Marry me."

She blinked, thinking to herself that she couldn't have heard him right. "What!" She swallowed against the constriction in her throat before speaking again. "Theo, I know you're quite the jester but cannot mean that."

"I do." There was not a hint of humor or anything in his countenance to suggest he was jesting. "Your family requires financial assistance and I require a wife. We have known each other our entire lives which provides a great advantage. And you are the only person I can imagine being married to, my old friend."

He was correct, their friendship was a decent enough foundation for marriage. Many a marriage had been built on less. But she wanted more, especially from him. In her one-and-twenty years, she'd never felt as torn as she did in that instant. Joy amalgamated with sadness and she ached from it. Now, his proposal clearly was born out of pity. Her pride could not deal with that blow. She did not think she needed that sort of rescue from him.

Stepping away from him, she squared her shoulders. "I can't."

"Why ever not?" Under different circumstances, his puzzlement would have amused her but now she only shrunk into herself.

"My family's predicament is not reason enough to marry."

She knew she'd just told him it was the reason she needed to marry but she would rather contradict herself than allow him to know she was refusing because she thought he was proposing out of pity. However, every fiber of her being wanted to say yes but her pride stood in the way.

A flummoxed laugh found its way from his chest. "Have you any notion what most *ton* marriages are based on?"

"Certainly, but I do not wish for my marriage to be based on titles and fortunes." Another lie. She was after saving her family and that required a man with a fortune.

His fingers ran through his dark hair as a frustrated sigh left his lips. "Never say you have dreams of love and romance, Estelle. It is not who you are."

Her choler began to rise like bile up her throat and her body went rigid. His tone held no mocking—merely surprise—but she still felt affronted. "What if I do? You knew a child, not the woman I have become."

Her response made his consternation visible, and his body tensed. "You are many things, Estelle but unreasonable is not one of them."

"Saying yes to a man that possesses more pity than affection for me is unreasonable."

That was it! She couldn't marry Theo and remaining there was far too tempting. She bit down on her lower lip to rein in her fluttering emotions. Then lowered herself into as graceful a curtsy as she could, murmuring, "My lord," before excusing herself from his presence, flushing furiously.

Chapter Three

“Estelle Astor, hmm?” Jameson quirked a dark brow from across the billiard table.

“What about her?” Theo asked distractedly. It was four damned days since the ball, and the confounding woman had refused to leave his thoughts and now his friend was shooting him a curious look as he brought her up.

The mere mention of her name stirred up the memory of a certain dream that involved Estelle and he groaned inwardly. For two nights in a row, he’d had to visit his mistress in Bloomsbury to find relief. What was worse, was the guilt that gnawed at his insides. Estelle was his childhood friend, for heaven’s sake! His body should not react to her in such a manner. It was positively forbidden!

“You did not tell me about her.”

“I did mention that she was my neighbor and friend.” Theo tossed back his brandy, relishing the trail of fire down his throat.

“Yes, but the two of you seemed more intimate than you made me believe,” Jameson insisted.

Theo aimed with his cue and took a shot, sending balls rolling around the table. “There is no intimacy between Estelle and me.” He rounded the table and took another shot, a more powerful one.

He had no room for intimacy in his heart. Such things only came with pain and betrayal as he had learned a long time ago.

“I proposed to her,” he announced, straightening to allow Jameson his turn.

“What?” Jameson gaped at him, his eyes conveying the extent of his surprise.

“I proposed to Estelle at the ball,” he repeated.

“She is not right for you, Campbell.”

It was Theo’s turn to be surprised. He did not expect Jameson to protest so vehemently. “How so?”

He faltered a little which struck him as odd. “I ... I don’t know. She could be ... dangerous.”

Theo scoffed at that. “You are being ridiculous, Jamie. Estelle would not harm even a fly. I know her.”

“You knew a little girl, not the woman she has become, Theo.” Jameson took a small sip of his drink. Estelle had said the same thing.

Just how much has she changed? He thought to himself.

“And if my recollection is right,” Jamie continued, “you did make mention of her chasing you with dead insects, which I might add is very embarrassing for you.”

“You will not repeat that to anyone.” He jabbed a finger in Jameson’s direction.

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it.” He laughed.

“What is your aim, Jamie? She declined my proposal, so I don’t know what you’re so worried about.” Theo was starting to get peeved at his friend.

“Oh, splendid! I only think that she is not right for you. She is not plain enough, and far too intelligent to tolerate your rakishness.”

That was true. Estelle was not a good candidate for his plan, yet he still wanted her. He’d thought that his opinion of her as his childhood friend was akin to a brother’s opinion of his sister. Oh, how wrong he’d been. His entire plan had exploded in his face the instant his hand had gone round her waist before their waltz. He began to feel grateful for her rejection of his offer. He feared he would have made the biggest mistake of his life.

“You seem a trifle uneasy there,” Jameson observed. “What say you we take a trip about town. I have a certain Cyprian I think you might fancy.”

Theo didn’t argue. If anything, he wanted thoughts of Estelle banished from his mind for good, and an encounter with a new light-skirt might give him just that. As he set his cue down, his butler Tucket, cleared his throat from the salon doorway. When Theo looked up, it was into the black gaze of the Duke of Dandridge.

“My apologies for the interruption, my lor—”

The duke’s cold glare had Tucket clamping his mouth shut and recoiling into the hallway.

Jameson, after sensing that his presence was not wanted, made his excuses, and followed Tucket out. And now the duke and his son faced each other with palpable contempt, each man ready to strike at the other where he knew would draw the most blood.

“Are you contemplating your mortality, father?” Theo asked, injecting as much insolence as he could muster into his tone. “For I would love to know where this need to see your only heir this frequently is arising from.”

The duke did not dignify his words with a reply. He only tossed a sheaf of papers onto the billiard table.

“This is how you want to play today, eh?” Theo murmured, then picked up the papers and began to glance through the contents, not giving anything his full attention until he saw a name:

Estelle Astor.

He returned to the previous page to find that in his hand was a marriage contract.

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

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About the Author

Born in sunny California, all Harriet Caves ever wanted was to become a doctor and save lives. During her sleepless nights working at the hospital, the Regency classics were her only solace. To no one's surprise, her British descent led her back to England to discover her roots and where her hidden passion lay: the Regency streets of London.

After obtaining a degree in Creative Writing there, Harriet decided to never leave this magnificent place. A daydreamer and an avid reader herself, she loves spending her days exploring the British countryside or seeking stories under the pebbles of the historical London alleys.

Though she abandoned the hospital wards, Harriet now mends hearts by transporting people back to an era of passionate love. Allow her skilled pen to take you to a special place where souls sing of love and dreams come to life!

